Why Do Employees Quit: 
A Case Study of the Complexities of Labour Turnover

Robyn Johns
School of Management University of Technology Sydney

Abstract

This research is a case study, the four primary determinants of intentions to quit and subsequently turnover featured in the expanded model of employee turnover process by Mobley, Griffeth, Hand and Meglino (1979) are utilised to explore the causes of voluntary labour turnover within the Australian operations of a large professional publishing organisation. The results indicate that whilst employees say that they are “satisfied”, they voluntarily separated from the organisation for a variety of reasons including the expected utility of internal and external roles.

Introduction

Labour turnover is a familiar term used to describe the permanent withdrawal of employees from an organisation. While some degree of labour turnover is inevitable, high levels can adversely affect efficiency, productivity and the profitability of an organisation (Campbell and Campbell, 2001; Mobley, 1982). Nevertheless a certain degree of labour turnover is desirable as it is capable of facilitating the generation of new ideas and helping an organisation adapt to the changing environment in which it operates (Dalton and Todor, 1993; Cascio, 1991; Staw 1980). The aim of this case study is to analyse the incidence of labour turnover using empirical data obtained from within the Australian operations of a large professional publishing organisation. By using the existing theoretical model by Mobley, Griffeth, Hand and Meglino (1979), the case study seeks understand the reasons why employees voluntarily quit the chosen organisation.

Expanded Model of the Employee Turnover Process

Over the years many attempts have been made to analyse and interpret the determinates of either voluntary labour turnover intentions or actual voluntary labour turnover (Brayfield and Crockett, 1955; Mobley 1977; Mowday, Porter and Steers, 1982; Price, 1977; March and Simon, 1958; Price, Mueller, 1981 and 1986; Agho et al, 1993; Hom and Griffeth, 1995). With few exceptions, such efforts have focused on job satisfaction as a major determinant influencing employees’ intention or decision to voluntarily turnover (Tan and Akhtar, 1995:35). Models have been devised by researchers such as March and Simon (1958), Mobley (1977), Porter and Steers (1982), and Price (1977), to examine job satisfaction as a specific subset of attitudes held by organisation members towards different dimensions of the job. More recent research has introduced the notion of organisational commitment as a major determinant (Tan and Akhtar, 1995; Zeffane and Gul, 1995; Mowday et al, 1979). The concept of organisational commitment is defined as the nature of the relationship of the organisation member to the system as a whole (Zeffane and Gul, 1995). According to Mowday and his colleague’s (1979) this relationship may result from shared values and goals and is differentiated from job
satisfaction as it demonstrates attachment to the employing organisation. Other determinants such as internal/external career paths, moral principals and/or accepted standards of an employee or groups of employees have been given little consideration in comparison.

The Mobley, Griffeth, Hand and Merglino (1979) expanded model of the employee turnover process attempts to go beyond the predominant determinants of job satisfaction and/or commitment to comprehend affiliated factors that influence a members’ intentions to quit. By incorporating elements of prior models by March and Simon (1958), Price, (1977) and Mobley (1977) the Mobley et al model attempts to capture the overall complexity of the individual turnover process. Although the authors acknowledge that it is unlikely that any single study can evaluate this complexity, they have nevertheless “sought to graphically illustrate the multiple organisational, environmental and individual variables associated with the labour turnover process” (Mobley, 1982:125). The Model (illustrated in Figure 1) puts forward four primary determinants of intentions to quit and subsequently turnover: (1) job satisfaction/dissatisfaction; (2) attraction and expected utility of alternative internal work roles; (3) attraction and expected utility of alternative external work roles; and (4) nonwork values and interests.

In the model Mobley and his colleague’s conceptualise several aspects of the first primary determinant job satisfaction to aid in understanding its relationship with labour turnover. Firstly it considers satisfaction on a highly individualised level. Mobley and his colleague’s maintain that both the magnitude and intensity of what individuals’ value in the work setting are highly variable. The second important aspect is employee perceptions; what an employee sees or thinks he or she sees, relative to his or her values. Mobley and his colleague’s claim that the third aspect is that satisfaction is multi-faceted. According to Mobley and his colleague’s (1979) since each employee has a variety of values, it is unlikely that any one value will control satisfaction unless it is extremely discrepant. The final aspect is present-oriented evaluation of the job. This aspect recognises that satisfaction does not capture the employee’s expectations and evaluation of future conditions within the organisation, therefore making satisfaction present rather than future orientated (Mobley et al, 1979).

The second determinant expected utility of internal roles, takes into consideration the availability, or lack of, upward mobility opportunities within the organisation. Whereas satisfaction is present oriented, attraction is considered to be future oriented and is seen as being based on the expectancies that the job will lead to future attainment of various positively and/or negatively valued outcomes (Mobley et al, 1979). While Mobely and his colleague’s state that there may be some correlation between satisfaction and attraction expected utility, they believe that these variables are conceptually distinct and should have separate effects on intentions (to search or to quit) and turnover. This belief has been supported by Graen and Ginsburg (1977) as their research found that individuals may be satisfied (or dissatisfied) with their present job, but may expect the present job to be relevant (or irrelevant) to their subsequent career. Like satisfaction, attraction is considered by Mobley and his colleague’s to have multiple aspects and the salience of these aspects is considered to be a function of individual differences and values.
The attraction and expected utility of external work roles is the third major determinant in the expanded model of employee turnover process. It seeks to capture the individuals’ expectation of finding an attractive job external to the present organisation (Mobley et al. 1979). The March and Simon (1958) decision to participate model also includes components that roughly correspond to this determinant. The last major determinant unlike the previous three takes into consideration nonwork values and interests. Nonwork values are enduring beliefs that relate to sought after life consequences or human behaviours and they act as a means of evaluating standards. Mobley and his colleague’s (1979) suggest that nonwork values contribute to the
explanation of labour turnover since social and family responsibilities also have the ability to restrain or empower a member’s decision of whether or not to quit. They therefore believe that an understanding of nonwork values and roles is important as polices, practices, and conditions within the organisation may interfere with the attainment of nonwork values.

Although it is accepted that there are limitations with the expanded model of employee turnover process in explaining such a complex phenomenon, it is thought that because the model uses individual, organisational and economic factors, it is more readily able to explicitly recognise the role of perceptions, expectations, and values as well as available job alternatives as factors in the labour turnover decision process thus resulting in a model that despite its generalised nature, has an greater ability to specify the determinants of labour turnover process.

Method
A case study was used in the research for this paper. Yin (1984) argues that a case study is “an empirical enquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context; when boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident; and in which multiple sources of evidence are used.” The case study was carried out within the Asia Pacific head office of the professional publishing operations of a leading global provider of integrated information solutions over a two year period (2000 and 2001). With its head office located in Sydney, Australia, it is one of the largest professional publishers in the Asia Pacific region, with approximately 400 employees located in its Sydney office and a further six hundred employees located throughout Australia and the Asia Pacific (New Zealand, Hong Kong, Singapore, Malaysia and Japan). The organisation from hereafter will be referred to as Pub Co.

The empirical data used in the case study was gathered throughout a two year period from administrative reports, exit interviews, and an employee survey. The administrative reports were produced by the human resources department at Pub Co and are sent to various organisational elements on a weekly basis. These reports notify recipients of any changes to the employment situation of individual members, that has either taken place in the preceding week or is expected to take place in the near future i.e. commencements, terminations, promotions, transfers etc. The report forms the basis for the collection, classification, and interpretation of labour turnover data which is included in Pub Co’s monthly human resource report.

The exit interviews were interviewer administered and conducted by human resources in the final days of employment. The main purpose of conducting the exit interview is to identify the reason/s behind the voluntary separation and acquire information that will help management identify problem areas. It is also thought to retain the employee’s goodwill when he or she becomes an ex-employee. The transcripts of an employees exit interview are maintained on their personal record. Information gained from the exit interview process is also housed in the human resource information system. During the case study 167 exit interviews were carried out.
The results from 296 employee engagement surveys were also utilised. The survey was sent out to all Pub Co employees’ worldwide (nineteen countries) and was designed to measure an employee’s emotional and intellectual commitment to Pub Co and its successes. Information was gathered about philosophies, practices and policies that influence the management of people in the key areas of compensation, job security, opportunities, people, procedures, work/life balance and the work environment.

The survey was delivered online (web based) in ten different languages and was also available in a hard copy for those employees who did not have the adequate skills necessary to use the online version. All permanent employees were encouraged to voluntarily participate during the administration period; 4th to 15th September 2000. Different formats were used for asking the questions. Some questions required participants to indicate their level of agreement or disagreement, whilst others had sliding scales. Opportunity was also given to add brief comments. It took approximately thirty minutes for respondents to complete the survey.

The study focused primarily on voluntary (self-initiated) turnover rather than involuntary (organisation-initiated as well as retirement and death) terminations and was composed of only salaried employees. The data was divided into the following sections: (a) individual demographic and personal factors, (b) job satisfaction, (c) organisational and work environment, (d) job content, (e) external environment, and (f) occupational groupings. It was measured using a number of aggregated methods codified by Price (1977) and acknowledged by Mobley et al (1979), allowing the case study to examine labour turnover and identify the causes for voluntary separation within the chosen organisational setting. It is beyond the scope of this paper to illustrate each of the variables in detail, though it has been done so more comprehensively elsewhere.

**Job Satisfaction/Dissatisfaction**
Satisfaction can be conceptualised as the discrepancy between what an individual values and what the situation provides (Locke, 1976). In the work organisational setting this can be taken to mean the general attitude of an individual towards their job. In the Pub Co employee engagement survey participants were asked to indicate their current level of satisfaction with several facets of the job and their work environment before indicating their overall level of satisfaction with the organisation as a place to work. The survey results were generally speaking as expected given the point in time in which the survey was conducted by Pub Co; during the lead up to 2000 Sydney Olympic Games, a time of immense excitement. This excitement may well have been expressed in the survey given the general belief that job satisfaction is considered to be a positive emotional state that reflects an affective response to the present rather than future (Mobley et al, 1979). Like most organisations Pub Co introduced increased levels of flexibility into their working hours during the Olympic Games period to allow employees to overcome the anticipated traffic problems and to let them enjoy the Olympic events. Changes included amendments to office hours, telecommuting, flexible working arrangements and a casual dress policy was adopted. These changes were widely embraced by staff leading up to and during the Olympic period. It may well have
been expected that against this backdrop, an overwhelming majority of Pub Co employees would be immensely satisfied.

Despite the general level of exuberance experience by many during the survey period, it still should come as no surprise that positive relationships among co-workers and between managers’ and their subordinates’ has a positive impact on an employee’s level of job satisfaction; especially considering work occupies a significant proportion of an employee’s life. With 94% (n = 279) of employees ranking satisfaction with their co-workers favourably and 88% (n = 260) ranking satisfaction with their manager favourably, it would appear that the workplace structure at Pub Co allows for gainful work relationships to be established. Mueller et al (1994) believe that by establishing positive workplace relations, a bond to the organisation is created that inturn reduces the likelihood of voluntary employee turnover. Although the subject of work relationships is not explicitly investigated by Mobley and his colleagues they do support Locke’s (1969) claim that satisfaction is an affective response to the evaluation of the job.

A positive result was also derived from a question which required employees’ to rank their level of satisfaction with their ability to balance work and personal life; 87% (n = 257) indicated that they were satisfied. This result is also consistent with current research that asserts that “employees who report organisational values to be more supportive of work and personal life balance also report greater job satisfaction” (Burke, 2001). An area not explicitly researched by Mobley and his colleagues.

Unlike workplace relationships and work and personal life balance, employee perceptions and evaluations of the job content are given significant consideration in Mobley and his colleagues’ research. In fact they have shown job content factors to have one of the more consistent correlates of labour turnover, an occurrence also supported by the case study. Employees were asked in employee engagement survey to rate their level of satisfaction with their day to day work, 80% (n = 237) gave a favourable response. Additional survey questions also aimed to gauge employee perceptions and evaluations concerning the job itself. For instance, employees were asked to rate whether they felt their work makes an important contribution to Pub Co’s success; 91% (n = 269) answered favourably.

Uncertainty over what is required by an employee by an organisation has been demonstrated to have a negative impact on job satisfaction. Literature suggests that as the definition of a job task becomes less clear, workers experience an increase in stress levels, frustration, and anxiety with job performance (Good et al., 1988). Hence it would appear that employees are more satisfied with their jobs when they feel their work makes an important contribution to the success of the organisation. This finding has also been reflected in past research on relationship between job satisfaction and job content by Hulin and Waters (1971) and Herman, Dunham and Hulin (1975).

However there were certain aspects of the job where one can say that Pub Co employees were less as satisfied, particularly in the area of pay and rewards. When employees were asked to rate their level of satisfaction with pay and rewards, only 47% (n = 139) of
employees answered favourably. Additional questions probed further into the pay and rewards area such as: do you feel you are fairly compensated based on your total contribution to the organisation. This question yielded a slightly more favourable result of 51% (n = 151). Employees were also ask whether they felt they were paid fairly compared with other employees in the business who do similar work at a similar performance level, 56% (n = 166) answered favourable. Finally they were asked to rate whether they felt their level of compensation at Pub Co was competitive with other places where they might work, 52% (n = 154) answered favourable. It could be argued that these less favourable responses to pay and rewards are consistent with the fact that Australian workers are socialised in a capitalistic society where money, benefits, and security are generally sought after and many times are used to gauge the importance or worth of a person. The greater the financial rewards, the less worry the typical employee has concerning his or her financial state; thus enhancing their impression of their self-worth to the organization (Lambert, Hogan and Barton, 2001).

Overall the employee engagement survey yielded relatively favourable results. While some researchers (Roznowski and Hulin, 1992) have found overall job satisfaction measures to be the most informative data for predicting labour turnover others have found it to be less predictive (Locke, 1976). However what is generally accepted is that the intention to stay or quit a job is the final cognitive step in the decision making process of voluntary labour turnover, hence its inclusion in the expanded model of employee turnover.

Attraction and Expected Utility of Alternative Internal Work Roles
Internal labour markets and promotional systems provide employees with a greater level of job security and provide an incentive for employees to work more diligently in order to increase their likelihood of a future promotion. It is also this allure of promotion that Mobley and his colleagues believe may also convince employees to stay with an organisation and thus have the effect of reducing labour turnover.

Throughout the case study research in 2000 and 2001 the most common reason given at exit interview by employees for quitting their job was that they were dissatisfied with future prospects within Pub Co; 28% in 2000 (n = 26) and 31.9% in 2001 (n = 30). Although these employees may well have been satisfied in their present job, it would appear they quit because of negative expectations about future roles within the organisation. It could therefore be said that the lack of perceived desirable promotional opportunities and/or the absence of a clear-cut understanding of what employees needed to do to advance within the organisation appears to have leaded many to seek roles externally, however, this may not necessarily have been the case.

During the exit interview process the primary reason given by an employee for their leaving Pub Co was pigeonholed into one of fourteen categories by the interviewer – (1) dissatisfied with company policies, (2) dissatisfied with future prospects, (3) dissatisfied with remuneration/benefits, (4) dissatisfied with the nature of work, (5) dissatisfied with working conditions, (6) seeking change of occupation field, (7) work relationships, (8) abandoned employment, (9) domestic/personal, (10) ill health, (11) pregnancy, (12)
further study, (13) overseas travel, and (14) moved out of area. Any employee who indicated their primary reason for quitting was to take on an alternate position was often placed into this category. Hence it did not necessarily mean that all Pub Co employees who voluntarily quit taking on alternative position external to the organisation were dissatisfied with their future prospects, as only those employees who explicitly communicated that they were quitting to seek an alternate position in a completely different occupational field were categorised differently.

Attraction and Expected Utility of Alternative External Work Roles
This determinant seeks to capture the individuals’ expectation of finding an attractive alternative job external to the present organisation. Mobley and his colleagues assert that the dissatisfied employee and/or the employee with low expectations regarding internal alternatives may not quit because attractive external jobs are not perceived. Conversely the satisfied employee and/or the employee with positive expectations regarding internal alternatives may quit because a highly attractive external job is perceived.

It is believed that the prevailing economic and labour market situation has the most influential effect on voluntary separations. Although a relationship does exist between the state of the economy and labour turnover, it cannot be assumed that it is a causal one. That is, the state of the labour market cannot be said to actually cause labour turnover. This is demonstrated by the differing labour turnover rates found between various departments within Pub Co. For example, in the first year of the study (2000) the publishing department had the highest annualised turnover rate of 39.3% (n = 33), whilst the publishing services department had an annual turnover rate of only 9.5% (n = 6) in 2000.

What is thought to happen is that the economic factors tend to either accentuate or put a brake on each organisation's own particular pattern of labour turnover. Thus a buoyant economy as such does not make employees leave their jobs in a particular firm; it simply provides them with a greater opportunity to do so if they wish.

Nonwork Values and Interests
Although there is little specific data within this study that specifically identifies the priorities of Pub Co employees around nonwork values and contingencies, the survey data does show that a majority of employees (87%, n = 257) appeared to be satisfied with their ability to balance work and personal life. This result is significant given that females dominated the workforce at Pub Co during the study, yet research in the work/life balance arena indicates that women are less likely to be satisfied than men with their ability to balance work and personal life (Burke, 2001; Thornthwaite, 2002).

Despite the favourable survey result it should be noted that the survey did not identify the percentage of females who took part in the actually survey process and considering that females had a higher annualised separation rate (60.2% in 2000 and 68.1% in 2001) than males during the survey process it is arguable as to whether female employees within Pub Co were truly satisfied with their ability to balance work and personal life.
Further analysis of the reasons given for voluntarily separations supports this premise as all employees bar one who were categorised as separating for domestic/personal reasons were female \( (n = 15) \). The extent to which nonwork values and contingencies contributed to labour turnover within Pub Co is therefore questionable.

An understanding of nonwork values and roles is important as polices, practices, and conditions within the organisation may interfere with the attainment of nonwork values. Pub Co management as a result has a key role to play in enhancing both organisational and individual benefits, by acknowledging the interrelationship between home and work, and the conflicting demands and loyalties facing employees, and adopting innovative and flexible work options.

**Conclusion**

The primary purpose of this case study was to analyse the incidence of labour turnover within Pub Co by utilising the existing theoretical model of Mobley, Griffeth, Hand and Meglino (1979), to aid in understanding the reasons why employees voluntarily quit. The model put forward four primary determinants of the decision to quit, namely job satisfaction, expected utility of alternate work roles internal to the organisation, expected utility of alternate work roles external to the organisation, and non-work values and roles. A definite advantage in using this model was its inclusion of individual, organisational and economic factors, and that it explicitly recognised the role of employee perceptions, expectations, and values as well as available job alternatives as factors in the labour turnover decision process. On the other hand a definite limitation of this model was its complexity and comprehensiveness thus making a research challenging. While overall the case study did yield favourable job satisfaction results, a significant advantage was its emphasis on expectancy. Whereas job satisfaction itself was established to be a present orientated evaluation, the inclusion of expected utility of internal and external roles meant that the model allowed for a more rigorous assessment of satisfaction, thus increasing the understanding of the voluntary employee turnover process.

**References**


Regulation, De-regulation and Re-regulation:
The Scope of Employment Relations in the 21st century

Proceedings
of the 11th Annual Conference
of the International Employment Relations Association.

University of Greenwich, England, July 2003

edited by
Professor Geoff White, Dr Susan Corby and Dr Celia Stanworth

International Employment Relations Association
Preface

The 11th annual conference of the International Employment Relations Association (IERA) took place at the University of Greenwich Business School in London, England. This was the first IERA annual conference to take place outside of the Asia-Pacific Region and marked a historic coming of age for the Association. It was decided at the 2003 conference that IERA should become a truly international body and the constitution was changed at the AGM to allow regional IERAs to be established in Europe, Australasia, Asia and North America, each with their own officers and annual conference. There will continue to be an annual international conference.

The 2004 conference took place from 8th to 11th July at the University of Greenwich Business School’s magnificent home in the Old Royal Naval College on the Greenwich World Heritage Site beside the Thames. This architectural ensemble is probably the finest set of historic buildings in England, designed by Sir Christopher Wren in the early 18th century and painted by Canaletto and Turner amongst others. Delegates were also lucky to experience some distinctly non-English weather with hot sunny days for the length of the conference. The conference was attended by almost 100 delegates and guests from around thirteen countries. The theme for the 2003 conference was ‘Employment Relations in the 21st Century: Regulation, deregulation and re-regulation’. Some seventy papers were given over the three days of the conference under various themes – worker representation and union renewal; flexible work and workers; new forms of management/union relations; public sector employment relations; equal opportunities; training and development; privatisation and deregulation; HRM and knowledge management; and employment relations in Asia.

The conference opened with a wine reception where delegates were welcomed by the Pro-Vice Chancellor of the University, Professor David Wills. Delegates were serenaded by musicians from the Trinity College of Music that shares the Greenwich site with the university. The conference started with a plenary session given by Professor Chris Brewster of Henley Management College on flexible working practices in Europe. Another plenary session on the Thursday morning brought together speakers from four organisations to give their views on current developments in British and global employment relations. These included Peter Brannen from the ILO, Sarah Veale from the TUC, Mike Emmott from the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development and Peter Burgess from the IDS European Report.

The conference dinner on Thursday evening was held in the Trafalgar, one of the most famous old inns along the Thames. The delegates were again serenaded but this time by the Andrea Vicari jazz trio. The conference finished on the Friday morning with a plenary session by Professor Anna Pollert, Professor of Employment Relations at Greenwich, who took as her theme ‘Women, work and equal opportunities in post-Communist transition’.

Special thanks must go to Dr Susan Corby and Dr Celia Stanworth from Greenwich’s academic staff who organised the event and Gill Haxell and Diane Barnett for the very successful administration of the conference. I would also like to thank those Greenwich staff who provided their services as referees for the abstracts submitted. Thanks are also due to Professor Les Johnson, Director of the Business School, for his support for the conference.
Finally I must thank Professor Janet Druker, joint secretary of IERA and Head of the University of East London Business School, who in her previous role as Director of Research at Greenwich did so much to sow the seeds for the success of the 2003 conference.

Many of the delegates attending the conference chose to deliver a paper and submit it for possible publication in the refereed proceedings. All papers for publication were submitted to double blind refereeing. In some cases, this resulted in papers being rejected at this stage. Those who had either abstracts or papers rejected are encouraged to use the IERA network to assist them in developing their papers in future. In some other cases, the referees’ comments led to substantial revisions to the papers delivered at the conference before they were accepted. All revised papers were then subjected to further refereeing.

The papers published in these proceedings include only those papers that were accepted by the conference referees. I would like to sincerely thank those IERA members who acted as referees for these proceedings.

- Lyn Bain
- Nikki Balmave
- Steven Barrett
- Deborah Blackman
- Jillian Christie
- Anneke Fitzgerald
- Louise Ingersoll
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- Doris Kluge
- Priscilla Leece
- Dennis Mortimer
- Ron Shapiro
- Meg Smith
- Keri Spooner

As mentioned at the start of this preface, IERA is now a truly international network of scholars in the field of employment relations with members on four continents. The 2004 conference will be taking place in Queensland, Australia but future annual conferences are planned for Ireland, Denmark and Hong Kong. As Vice-President for Europe I wish the IERA 2004 conference well and trust that they will build on the new international strengths developed in Greenwich in 2003. We will also be happy to greet IERA members at the 2004 European IERA Symposium to be held at the University of Utrecht in late August.

Professor Geoff White, MA, Chartered Fellow of the CIPD.
Professor of Human Resource Management, Head of the Department of Management and Vice-President IERA Europe.
University of Greenwich Business School,
Queen Anne Court,
Old Royal Naval College,
Park Row,
Greenwich,
London
SE10 9LS
UK
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