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ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE AND THE ANTECEDENTS OF TURNOVER IN HIGH-STRESS IT JOBS

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Abstract

This study investigates the moderating effect of organizational culture on the relationships among job satisfaction, organizational commitment, burn out, and turnover intention in high-stress, information technology fields such as help desk consultants. Determining the factors which affect turnover intention will provide useful guidance to managers wishing to retain valuable IT staff and contribute to our understanding of the factors influencing IT work attitudes and ultimately IT outcomes.

Introduction

The demand for qualified information technology (IT) workers is far outstripping the pool of available talent. In such a tight IT labor market, employee retention becomes a paramount concern of IT managers. Certain fundamental IT jobs involve working in high-stress environments. For example, help desk employees often experience high levels of stress and exhibit correspondingly high levels of turnover. Interviews with help desk managers, the publications of web designer journals, and articles in software development practitioner journals indicate the magnitude of the turnover problem among these high tech IT employees.

The research questions under consideration in this study are : What factors related to job satisfaction, burnout, and organizational commitment promote turnover intention among high-stress IT employees? And, once identified, how can those factors be controlled by IT managers?

Prior Research

Work-Related Variables

In a recent review of research on work attitudes and outcomes, it was suggested that certain key constructs were fundamental to an understanding of employee turnover. The key turnover constructs are: job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and turnover intention ENRfu(Lease, 1998). Job satisfaction can be defined as the degree to which the work environment fulfills the individual's needs, or the degree of an employee's affective orientation toward the work roles occupied in the organization ENRfu(Dawis and Lofquist, 1984). Organizational commitment is conceptualized as a multi-dimensional construct consisting of affective commitment, continuance, and normative commitment ENRfu(Meyer, et al., 1991; Meyer, et al., 1998). Turnover intention can be operationally defined as career intent (intention to stay) or intention to leave and has been related to absenteeism ENRfu(Somers, 1995).

Burnout can be defined as a multi-dimensional construct consisting of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and personal accomplishment (or lack thereof) and is usually associated with high-stress work environments ENRfu(Maslach and Florian, 1988; Maslach and Goldberg, 1998). Intuitively, the effect of burnout on job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and turnover intention should be significant, but these issues have received little research effort in the IS/IT field.

Organizational Culture

Organizational Culture can be defined as widely held behavioral norms and expectations ENRfu(Cooke and Rousseau, 1988; Cooke and Szumal, 1993). Others ENRfu(Moran and Volkwein, 1992; Schein, 1990) have defined organizational culture differently. Moran and Volkwein (1992) suggest that culture be conceptualized as reflecting contents of the mind e.g. myths, stories, values, norms, and beliefs that serve as symbols of shared meaning to members of a group. Schein (1990) defines organizational culture in the following way:

“a pattern of basic assumptions, invented, discovered or developed by a given group as it learns to cope with its problems of external adaptation and internal integration that has worked well enough to be considered valid and thus is taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, and feel in relation to those problems.”
(p. 111)

Organizational culture has been categorized in a tri-partite scheme as constructive, passive-defensive, and aggressive-defensive ENRfu(Cooke and Rousseau, 1988; Cooke and Szumal, 1993). Organizational Culture is often cited as an important moderator of employee beliefs, attitudes, intentions, and behaviors. Based on this perceived importance in patterns of employee thought and feeling, one important research question regarding employee turnover intention is: To what extent do differences in organizational culture moderate the associations among the constructs in a model of the effects of burnout, job satisfaction and organizational commitment on turnover intention in high-stress IT jobs?

Proposed Research and Methodology

This study will utilize survey methodology and both confirmatory and exploratory techniques to develop and test a structural model of the antecedents of turnover intention and the moderating effects of culture on the model relationships (See Figure 1). All methods of assuring unbiased results will be utilized, including methods to obtain a representative sample, eliminate methods bias, and reduce social desirability response bias.

Model

Based on a review of the literature, the proposed hypotheses represented in the structural model are as follows:

- H1: Burnout is negatively related to organizational commitment.
- H2: Burnout is negatively related to job satisfaction.
- H3: Burnout is positively related to turnover intention.
- H4: Job satisfaction is positively related to organizational commitment.
- H5: Job satisfaction is negatively related to turnover intention.
- H6: Organizational commitment is negatively related to turnover intention.

Each of the arrows in the figure represents a hypothesized relationship. The relationships involving burnout are hypothesized to be negative. Data for model testing will be gathered from multiple sites and online survey methods will be employed.

Moderating Effects of Organizational Culture

It is hypothesized that the trait-based model of organizational culture involves complex effects on the relationships in the model. Because of space limitations, these hypotheses have been omitted. This is the exploratory component of the study.

Respondents

This study will utilize stratified sampling in order to obtain samples from distinct organizational cultures. Multiple field sites will be utilized in this study. Respondents for this study will be high stress IT employees of large corporate organizations.

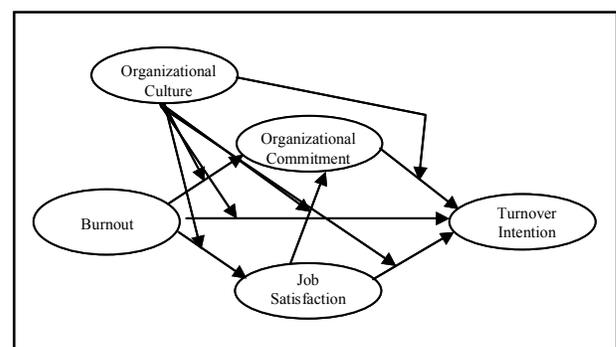


Figure 1. Research Model

Measures

All measures used in this study will come from previously validated scales. Existing, validated measures of job satisfaction, organizational commitment, burnout, turnover intention, and organizational culture will be incorporated into an online instrument.

Culture (OCI; 12 measure sets)

Constructive Styles

- achievement (values goal attainment)
- affiliative (emphasizes personal relationships)
- self-actualizing (values creativity, quality, task accomplishment and growth)
- humanistic-encouraging (participative and person-centered)

Passive-Defensive Styles

- approval (values agreement; avoidance of conflict)
- dependent (hierarchically controlled and non-participative)
- conventional (conservative)
- avoidant (negative reward system)

Aggressive-Defensive Styles

- power (expectation of reward on basis of authority and control)
- competitive (winning over others is valued)
- oppositional (confrontation is rewarded)
- perfectionistic (hard work and perfectionism is valued)

Burnout (MBI; 22 Items)

- personal accomplishment
- emotional exhaustion
- depersonalization

Organizational Commitment (12 items)

- affective commitment
- continuance
- normative commitment

Turnover Intention

Demographics information will also be obtained.

- age
- gender
- job title
- length of employment

Proposed Analysis and Expected Results

The psychometrics of the model displayed in Figure 1 will be ascertained using confirmatory factor analysis. The construct validity defined as the content validity, unidimensionality, convergent validity, construct reliability, discriminant validity will be analyzed using single-group LISREL modeling in the confirmatory factor analysis mode. Subsequent to and dependent upon the establishment of the psychometric quality of the model and measures, the plausibility of the full structural model will be tested with pooled data from multiple sites.

Once both the psychometrics of the model/measures have been established and the plausibility of the full model is ascertained, the moderator analysis of the effect of each of the 12 traits comprising the dimensions of organizational culture on the relationships in the model will be done.

Assessing the plausibility of the model is the confirmatory component of the study. The exploratory component of the study involves analyzing the effects of organizational culture on the relationships among the constructs in the model. We are assessing the effects of moderator (sub-grouping) variables and these moderator effects will be ascertained through an analysis of trait differences on the structural parameters in the model based on a multi-group LISREL analysis. Multi-group LISREL involves splitting the data based on the value of some categorical or categorizable moderator variable that is not contained within the LISREL model itself (Baron and Kenny, 1986). Through an examination and direct testing of the equality of parameters across samples, inferences can be made concerning the effects of the moderator variable.

Discussion and Conclusion

IT Employee retention is a very important factor in the delivery of high-quality IT services to functional units and individuals within the organization. Many IT employees operate in a high-stress environment and are subject to the stressors that induce burnout. IT employees often represent repositories of high levels of business and technical knowledge and recipients of high levels

of organizational investment in terms of training dollars spent. The goal of managers in this environment should be to retain such employees if possible. Knowledge of the factors predisposing high-stress employees to exit the organization can contribute to our knowledge of how to alter conditions to induce them to stay.

The model proposed in this study if found plausible will enhance our knowledge of the possible protective measures that can prevent high rates of turnover among IT employees. It is likely that through careful attention to combating individual factors such as emotional exhaustion and depersonalization, managers may be able to reduce turnover of valuable IT employees. It is also likely that reductions in turnover can result from positive changes in organizational culture. The study described in this paper will help illuminate the effects of organizational culture on the relationships among burnout, organizational commitment, job satisfaction, and turnover intention. This represents a crucial first step toward the goal of IT employee retention.

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