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Vicki McKinney

University of Arkansas, vrmckinney@earthlink.net

Karen Crooker

University of Wisconsin - Milwaukee, kcrooker@uwm.edu

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Retaining IT Professionals: The Influence of Work/Family Issues

Vicki McKinney, University of Arkansas, CISQA Dept., 204 BADM, Fayetteville, AR 72701, 501/575-4500, vrmckinney@earthlink.net

Karen Crooker, University of Wisconsin- Milwaukee, Box 742, Milwaukee, WI 53201, 414/229-6296, kcrooker@uwm.edu

Abstract

Companies face opportunity losses from projects they cannot take on due to a shortage of people resources (Goff, 2000a). Given the effect a shortage of qualified IT workers has on a company, many employers are giving increased attention to managing turnover. Turnover (individuals leaving employers) research has consistently examined the relationship of organizational commitment, job satisfaction and stress/ burnout to turnover. However, little empirical work has been done from the perspective of employee retention. The purpose of this research proposal is to identify what factors beyond job satisfaction, organizational commitment and stress have the strongest relationship to an IT professional's intention to stay with their current employer.

Introduction

Recently it was reported it can take six to nine months to fill an IT position (Goff, 2000a). This lag time is critical when organizations are in a race to get new projects operational. Given the shortage of qualified IT workers, many employers are giving increased attention to employee retention. Employee turnover forces the organization to focus on issues of recruiting, selecting and orienting new employees rather than attaining strategic goals. The price tag to the company for filling a vacancy is estimated to be up to 120% of a year's salary for the position (Vitalari and Dell, 1998). In an effort to control costs and meet demands, many organizations are taking a look at how to retain IT professionals. This interest in employee retention has resulted in a reexamination of benefit packages, with new attention given to helping employees balance their professional and personal lives (Goff, 2000b). Many companies now offer work/family support, such as flexible work hours, daycare centers, elder care and onsite dry-cleaning services.

Our research utilizes the turnover literature to gain insight into employee retention. Research on turnover has repeatedly examined organizational commitment, job satisfaction and stress/ burnout as antecedents. The purpose of this research proposal is to identify what additional factors help to explain an IT professional's intention to stay with their current employer.

Literature Review

Since retention is the inverse of turnover, we reviewed the turnover literature to see what is known about an employee's intention to leave. Prior research has established the relationship between turnover and job satisfaction, organizational commitment and stress. In an effort to help managers retain workers, we translate what is known about turnover into a retention perspective. We use this turnover core as a catalyst from which to develop a holistic explanation of employee retention. However, turnover research has historically focused primarily on the employee's professional life. This study attempts to complete the holistic view by also examining the personal factors that influence employee retention. For this we draw on the work/family literature.

The Turnover Catalyst

Turnover research has produced numerous theoretical frameworks. March and Simon's (1958) Theory of Organizational Equilibrium, the first formal theory, viewed employee turnover as the balancing of perceived desirability and the perceived ease of movement from the organization. The primary factor influencing the employee's desire to leave the organization was the level of job satisfaction. Availability of employment alternatives in the larger economy affected ease of movement. Today, making the workplace environment desirable has increased in importance for employers hoping to retain their employees, given the abundance of job opportunities available for skilled IT professionals.

As demonstrated in the models developed by Mobley, Griffeth, Hand, and Meglino (1979) and Steers and Mowday (1981), job satisfaction has remained a key construct as turnover theory has developed. Reviews and meta analyses of the turnover literature (Cotton and Tuttle, 1986; Porter and Steers, 1973; Rosse and Miller, 1984) support the relationship of (low) job satisfaction to (high) turnover. As an emotional state (Locke, 1976), job satisfaction is a product of individuals' ruminations on the nature of their work, quality of supervision, relationships with co-workers, possibilities for promotion, and satisfaction with pay (Smith, Kendall, and Hulin, 1969).

Organizational commitment, first formalized by Becker (1960), is another construct that has been used to

differentiate between employees remaining with a company and employees leaving (Mathieu and Zajac, 1990; Mowaday, Porter, and Steers, 1982). Over the years, researchers have recognized organizational commitment as being a multi-dimensional construct (Reichers, 1985; O'Reilly and Chatman, 1986). The latest research defines organizational commitment with affective, continuance, and normative dimensions (Allen and Meyer, 1993). Affective commitment, corresponding to the work of Mowaday, et al. (1982), "refers to an employee's emotional attachment to, identification with, and involvement in the organization" (Meyer and Allen, 1991, p. 67). Meyer and Allen (1991) define normative commitment as the moral obligation an employee has to the organization, where as, continuance commitment reflects an employee's awareness of the cost of leaving the organization.

In addition, researchers recognize certain turnover issues are more salient for IT professionals than for other employee populations. In 1983, stress was examined in terms of IT job characteristics (Ivancevich, Napier, and Wetherbe, 1983). Turnover is one outcome stress was modeled as influencing. These early findings reported the top three stressful IT job characteristics as communication satisfaction, fairness of rewards and work overload. Recently, Moore (in press) found work exhaustion to affect IT employees' intention to leave a job. In her findings, work overload, often caused by insufficient staff and resources, was cited as the primary cause of exhaustion.

While traditional turnover research focused on job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and stress, employees' lifestyles have changed. Today many workers find themselves coping with increasingly complex family issues resulting from dual career or single-parent situations (Bond, Galinsky, and Swanberg, 1998). Juggling the schedules of multiple household members while providing adequate care for children or aging family members creates personal challenges unknown when turnover theory was first developed. The newest turnover theory takes a step toward recognizing these issues. The Unfolding Model of Turnover (Lee and Mitchell, 1994) focuses on how an employee reacts to "system shocks." The theory allows that these shocks may occur in either personal or professional environments.

According to the theory, an employee's decision to stay with or leave an organization after a shock depends on which one of four decisions paths coincides with the employee's "decision frame" (Lee and Mitchell, 1994). An employee's decision frame, an extension of image theory (Beach, 1991), is influenced by internal images held by the employee. It is theorized that an employee's internal value system influences these internal images. This allows that family issues may be salient to an employee's decision to leave or stay with an employer, although applications of the theory (e.g., Lee & Maurer, 1999) persist in focusing exclusively on professional

concerns. Consequently we propose that an additional, personal dimension be considered when examining employee retention, the element of work/family conflict.

Work/Family Issues

While turnover scholars may have ignored the fact that employees have families, family researchers have not ignored the fact that families work. Thus work/family conflict is said to occur when the general demands of, time devoted to, and strain created by an employee's job interfere with the employee performing family-related responsibilities (Netemeyer, Boles, and McMurrin, 1996). According to Kossek and Nichol (1991), employees' efforts to reduce work/family conflict may impact an organization's ability to recruit and retain workers. A Canadian study found the act of balancing work and family added to an employee's stress level if there is a lack of organizational support (Duxbury, Higgins, Lee and Mills, 1992). Employers may also notice variations in employee commitment and satisfaction levels, as well as absenteeism rates and turnover intentions (e.g., Duxbury et al., 1992; Grover & Crooker, 1995; Oppenheim Mason & Duberstein, 1992) due to work/family issues. While work/family issues have been linked to employer outcomes in this literature, the research focus has been on the challenges faced by specific demographic groups (like working mothers in Ozer, 1995), not challenges faced by a particular profession. In the case of IT professionals, they are asked, in order to maintain service commitments, to work irregular schedules that can wreak havoc with family routines. At the same time, they work in an economy that offers abundant job alternatives. We contend that the less conflicted IT employees feel about work and family issues the more likely they are to stay with their employer.

Proposition 1: Work/family conflict will add to the explanation of an individual's intentions to stay with an organization.

Proposition 2: Interaction between scheduling (evenings, weekends, holidays, on-call) practices and work/family conflict will decrease an individual's intention to stay with an organization.

Methodology

This research project is designed to investigate the influence of work/family issues on an employee's intention to stay with his/her current employer. By gaining a better understanding of these issues employers will have a comprehensive view by which to evaluate their organization's human resource benefits in terms of employee professional/personal balance. Human resource benefits are partially designed to help retain good

employees. Furthermore, in today's market, it is imperative organizations build employee loyalty since limited resources and a low unemployment rate influence today's hiring decisions. The following section describes the participants and data collection.

Participants

Using the criterion of current employment in an IT position, companies have been recruited to participate in the study based on their access to employees in operational and lower management positions. Retention of executive level IT employees is not focused on in this study. Initial data collection involves IT professionals at a midwest marketing research firm and urban students at a midwestern university. All the students are currently enrolled in an undergraduate Systems Analysis and Design (SAD) course. Team members, team leaders and team managers from a midwest financial services company will be solicited in the main survey.

Data Collection

The entire marketing research firm's IT staff received the developed questionnaire, which utilizes previously validated instruments, from the IT Director. Two sections of the SAD course also received questionnaires. After examination of the preliminary findings is completed, the CIO's office at the financial services company will distribute the main survey's questionnaire to qualifying employees. To allow anonymity, a business reply envelope is provided with each questionnaire, thus, allowing participants to return the questionnaire directly to the researchers.

Conclusion

Retaining talented IT employees is an important challenge facing many organizations. The cost associated with the loss and replacement of skilled IT employees is forcing employers to reevaluate benefit packages. This study adds a new dimension to the evaluation process by examining the influence of work/family issues on an employee's intention to leave an organization. With a job market full of opportunity, an unhappy employee is not afraid to say "GOOD-BYE."

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