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Information Technology Worker Turnover: An Integrative Model and Empirical Test

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Although numerous studies have examined information technology (IT) worker turnover, researchers have not used utility approaches to explain the failure of firms to retain IT employees. Utility approaches are important because they explain how comparisons of the present job to alternatives or future opportunities influence behavior (Mobley et al. 1979). Hence, the purpose of this paper is to integrate utility estimates with existing research on IT worker turnover. To do so, we draw on expectancy and utility approaches that explain the cognitive processes leading to turnover. First, we define the dependent variables.

**DEPENDENT VARIABLES**

**Turnover Intentions.** Turnover intentions (TI) refer to employees’ intention to search (ITS) for new jobs or intention to quit (ITQ) their current jobs (Mobley et al. 1979). Theory suggests that intentions such as ITS or ITQ mediate the affect of other beliefs and attitudes on behavior i.e., turnover (Azjen 1988). ITS may also be an antecedent to ITQ.

- **H1.** Intention to search positively influences actual turnover.
- **H2.** Intention to quit positively influences actual turnover.
- **H3.** Intention to search positively influences intention to quit.

**Expectancy Approaches.** Expectancy theory suggests that differences between expected and actual experiences lead to turnover. Expectancy-based research uses affective responses such as job satisfaction (JS) to measure the cumulative level of met expectations (Mowday et al. 1982). JS refers to “a pleasurable or positive emotional state resulting from the appraisal of one’s job or job experience” (Locke 1976). As unmet expectations grow larger, JS decreases and the probability of turnover increases. Empirical findings support a moderate relationship between expectations and turnover. Within the domain of IT, research has linked affective responses such as JS to TI (Igbaria and Greenaus 1992). Across domains, meta-analyses suggest that affective responses to met or unmet expectations have strong, significant relationships with TI (Griffeth et al. 2000). In general, empirical findings suggest, and meta-analyses confirm, that unmet expectations lead to turnover.

- **H4a.** Job satisfaction negatively influences intention to search.
- **H4b.** Job satisfaction negatively influences intention to quit.

**Utility Approaches.** The utility framework views turnover behavior as a function of the relative quality of different job alternatives (Mobley et al. 1979). Where JS measures met or unmet expectations, utility estimates measure evaluations of future attainment of positive or negative outcomes (Mobley et al. 1979). It assumes that positive evaluations of a job increase its utility and decrease turnover. Evaluation of alternatives refers to “the individual’s valuation of the rewards offered by different
alternatives and his appraisal of his chances of being able to realize each alternative” (Blau et al. 1956, pg. 533). Even if they want to leave a firm, individuals evaluate alternative jobs’ utility prior to quitting or searching for a new position. As alternative jobs’ utility levels increase, turnover is more likely. HRM studies have found that satisfaction, utility of a present job, and utility of job alternatives have distinct significant effects on TI (Griffeth et al. 2000). To the best of our knowledge, MIS researchers have not applied the utility approach to the IT turnover problem.

Within competitive IT labor markets, it is important to consider how affective responses and utility estimates influence turnover. Even though individuals may express positive affective responses to their jobs, alternatives that have substantially greater utility may lure IT employees away from a firm.

H5a. Utility of present job negatively influences intention to search.
H5b. Utility of present job negatively influences intention to quit.
H6a. Utility of alternative jobs positively influences intention to search.
H6b. Utility of alternative jobs positively influences intention to quit.

THE STUDY

Participants were IT professionals in 34 public agencies located in the southeastern United States. They completed a questionnaire comprised of validated measures from the HRM literature. Partial least squares was used to test the hypotheses (Chin et al. 1996). Results (see Figure 1) provided support for the research model.

![Research Model Results](image)

DISCUSSION

This study develops a conceptual model of the cognitive processes leading to IT worker turnover. The study extends prior research by introducing and demonstrating the usefulness of utility estimates as predictors of turnover intentions. In addition to met or
unmet expectations (i.e., JS), data analysis indicates that utility estimates of the present and alternative jobs influence turnover intentions. As hypothesized, JS and utility estimates’ influence on actual turnover were mediated by ITS and ITQ. Contrary to our expectations, ITS fully mediated JS and utility estimates’ influence on ITQ. This suggests that employees who have low JS or possess unfavorable utility estimates first consider searching for a new position, then form ITQ. This finding underscores the importance of examining ITS when examining IT worker turnover. Future studies may seek to identify additional factors which influence links between antecedents, ITS, and ITQ. As a group, these implications provide fertile ground for future research that extends or refines our findings.

References
