

Should I stay or should I go? What makes employees voluntarily leave or keep their jobs

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Employers would be better at keeping workers if they focused on why their employees want to stay rather than what kinds of things make them quit, according to researchers from the University of Washington and Truman State University.

Until recently, most research focused on why people leave jobs rather than why they choose to stay. In a review of the past 15 years of research on employee job satisfaction and voluntary turnover, the researchers examined not only why people quit but what makes workers stay in their current positions.

They found that the decision to quit one's job doesn't necessarily come from job dissatisfaction. Employees may have a plan to leave should something happen in their lives, such as a spouse getting a job in another town. They may leave because they get an unexpected job offer. They also may leave with no other job in hand.

Wendy Harman, lead author and an assistant professor of business at Truman State University in Kirksville, Mo., examined previous research for this paper while a doctoral student at the UW Business School. She says there are steps organizations can take to retain good employees.

"As we head into an era of the largest brain drain the world has ever experienced, that of the baby boomers leaving the workforce, it is going to become increasingly important for organizations to be able to keep their best workers," she says. "Turnover is extremely expensive for

organizations and becomes even more so the more an organization increases the amount of training time and money it invests in its employees. Knowing how to retain these employees creates a less costly, more stable work and community environment."

Terrence Mitchell, a professor of management and organization in the UW Business School and a psychology professor, and Thomas Lee, a UW professor of management, co-authored the paper. They developed two theories in the field of job turnover that they say are new to the subject of the psychology of voluntary turnover. The first, the "unfolding model," explains why employees quit. The second, "job embeddedness," tells why workers stay. Understanding both of these theories could help employers keep their best employees.

The unfolding model describes different psychological paths people follow when they decide to leave an organization. Faced with circumstances or "shocks," such as a fight with one's boss or an unanticipated job offer, an employee is forced to decide to stay or leave. Turnover decisions, say Mitchell and Lee, are influenced by comparisons between the investments made in their job or organization, the rewards they receive, the quality of alternatives and the costs associated with working for a particular organization -- and all of these comparisons change over time.

Job embeddedness describes a web of forces that cause one to feel he or she would not leave a job. The critical components to job embeddedness include the extent to which people are linked with other people or to activities, the extent to which their jobs and communities fit with other aspects of their lives, and the ease with which their respective links can be broken, or what they would sacrifice if they left.

"The reasons we keep a job are not necessarily the opposite of why we leave," says Lee. "We may stay at a job we dislike because we are linked

with others -- we feel a sense of belonging to a group that depends on us and we'd have to sacrifice things that are important to us should we move, such as an office with windows or living in a nice neighborhood. Or we feel as though we fit there or in our community."

Organizational leaders should understand that why employees quit often has nothing to do with being unhappy about the job and that helping build a sense of community among its employees can prevent them from quitting, the researchers say.

According to Lee, people tend to stay in their jobs because they are linked to the job or the community, they feel as though they fit in the organization or community and if they leave, they would have to sacrifice things they have accumulated. People can be linked to others by working in groups or teams dependent on that person for success, both on and off the job. A good example of off-the-job links facilitated by the organization include community service days during which groups from the organization work together in donating their time to charity.

"Fit is important in that people need to feel as though they fit in the organization and in their community," says Harman. "Should they feel congruence between their values and goals and those of the organization, they will be more embedded in the organization. Should they feel as though they and their families fit in the community in which they live, again they will be more embedded and more likely to stay. When people leave an organization, they sacrifice whatever they've built up during their tenure, like a cushy corner office. When someone leaves a community, again there are sacrifices such as friends and home. The more that would have to be sacrificed, the more embedded the person is."

The paper appears in the February issue of the journal *Current Directions in Psychological Science*. William Felps and Bradley Owens, both

doctoral students at the UW Business School, also are co-authors.

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