

Research: Business should embrace 'boomerang employees'

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The phenomenon of "boomerang employees" is not unique to professional athletes, says two studies co-written by T. Brad Harris, a professor of labor and employment relations at Illinois. Credit: L. Brian Stauffer

The return of LeBron James to the Cleveland Cavaliers may have riveted the sports world and social media, but the phenomenon of "going home," whether to a geographic location or a former job, is not unique to professional athletes.

According to two studies co-written by a University of Illinois expert in organizational behavior and human resources management, organizations of all types are beginning to recognize and embrace the value of recruiting and welcoming back former employees.

From infantry soldiers to chief executives, accountants and professional basketball players, many organizations proactively recruit and rehire former employees as a way to offset high turnover costs and hedge against the uncertain process of socializing replacement employees.

Ideally, these so-called "boomerang employees" already understand the key components of the organization's work structure and culture, which makes them less risky hires than newcomers, says T. Brad Harris, a professor of labor and employment relations at Illinois.

"In addition to understanding the organizational culture, returning employees might also be more committed to the focal organization upon their return because, in essence, they've learned firsthand that the grass isn't always greener on the other side," Harris said.

In a paper published in the summer issue of *Personnel Psychology*, Harris and his co-authors – Stacie Furst-Holloway of the University of Cincinnati, Benson Rosen of the University of North Carolina, and Abbie J. Shipp of Texas Christian University – found that the experiences encountered by boomerang employees were distinct in a number of ways.

"After surveying and interviewing hundreds of employees, we were able to see that boomerang employees were more likely to originally leave an organization not because of dissatisfaction with the job, but because of some personal shock, such as a pregnancy, spousal relocation or an unexpected job offer," Harris said. "Somewhat unexpectedly, we also found that boomerang employees, compared to non-boomerang

employees, typically had shorter original tenures with the focal organizations."

Although Harris and his colleagues' initial research was one of the first studies to unravel the processes and experiences shared by boomerang employees, it didn't determine how differences across boomerang employee experience affect their re-employment performance.

In a recent working paper, however, Harris and another set of co-researchers studied that issue by using a sample of boomerang employees in the National Basketball Association.

The research found that re-employment performance was significantly predicted by the harmony of the original tenure, and their success during the time spent away from the focal organization and conditions of the return.

"Our latest research suggests that organizations should realize that not all boomerangs are created equal," Harris said. "When evaluating potential boomerang hires, organizations should first, and most obviously, consider their previous performance histories at the focal organization and at their most recent employer.

"Second, organizations should be mindful that employees who originally left on good terms and of their own volition might be better suited for a return than those who left more acrimoniously. And finally, employees who are not gone for very long might possess more of the desirable attributes of boomerang employees, such as accurately recalling the [organizational culture](#) and understanding the social norms expected in it."

Harris and his co-authors would not commit to specific predictions about James' return to Cleveland, noting that their statistical findings would be

best applied to large groups rather than individual cases. However, one of the study's co-authors, Brian Swider of Georgia Tech's Scheller College of Business, said James' performance has always been exceptional, "which fits with our 'past performance predicts future performance' arguments."

"Although LeBron's original decision to voluntarily leave Cleveland was much derided, the fact that it was clearly of his own volition might work to Cleveland's favor," Swider said. "But our model doesn't exactly account for the extreme vitriol displayed by Cleveland fans or even the owner, which makes this case particularly interesting. Although many Heat fans probably wish LeBron's tenure in Miami was longer, the brevity of his stay on South Beach should have Cavalier fans smiling."

More information: "Employees on the Rebound: Toward a Framework for Boomerang Employee Performance," *Personnel Psychology*, 2014.

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