

Workforce resilience is dynamic, not a static character trait

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A new study finds that resilience is a dynamic process, rather than a fixed trait—and suggests this may have significant ramifications for the business world.

"Organizations are interested in cultivating a resilient workforce, because they want people who are able to remain committed to an organization and its goals over [time](#)," says Patrick Flynn, corresponding author of the study and an assistant professor of human resources management at North Carolina State University's Poole College of Management.

"Our work here does a couple things," Flynn says. "First it finds that [resilience](#) is more of a process than a characteristic. Second, it identifies some of the characteristics that can contribute to that process in a meaningful way. Taken together, we think the findings can inform recruitment, hiring, operations and training practices."

At the heart of the study is the idea that resilience fluctuates, because it encompasses the way that an individual responds to a variety of circumstances over time.

"It's impossible to assess dynamic resilience at any given moment," Flynn says. "Dynamic resilience is demonstrated across time. How does people's behavior change over time? What influences that? Those are the sorts of questions we wanted to answer with this study."

To that end, researchers worked with 314 members of a university marching band. Study participants were surveyed weekly for 12 weeks. The surveys were designed to collect data on individual participants and their emotional and personal characteristics. To assess how resilience is functioning in individuals over time, the researchers also asked study participants about their commitment to the marching band as an organization, as well as their feelings of "burnout"—specifically, emotional exhaustion related to their work in the organization.

"Tracking the trajectories of commitment and burnout helped us see how resilience played out in real world terms," Flynn says.

The researchers found that, on average, emotional exhaustion increased over time and commitment decreased over time. However, there were factors that influenced those effects.

For example, experience within the organization exacerbated the effects of [emotional exhaustion](#) and decreased commitment. In other words, newcomers appeared to be more resilient over the study period.

The researchers also found that people who scored higher on assessments of emotional stability were better able to maintain higher levels of commitment.

Lastly, the researchers also looked at the trajectory of each individual's commitment to the organization to see if it predicted "retention." They found that positive commitment trajectories were associated with a greater likelihood of both planning to return to the organization for another year and then subsequently doing so.

"One takeaway here is that annual employee surveys may not be the best way to assess employee resilience and [commitment](#) to an organization," Flynn says.

That's because annual surveys provide snapshots, while resilience is a dynamic process that fluctuates.

"Since resilience affects things like employee retention, which are important to a company's bottom line, we really need to be touching base with employees more often," Flynn says.

The work also shows that resilience can wear down over time, even if people are only exposed to mild stressors.

"Chronic stress can wear down resilience, with ramifications for

[employee](#) retention and, in all likelihood, job performance," Flynn says.

"However, we also feel that thinking about resilience as a [dynamic process](#) creates opportunities to foster resilience in employees not only through recruitment, but through training, and even job design. In short, it's not as simple as hiring the right person and assuming things will work out. Fostering resilience is going to be an ongoing task for management and human resources professionals."

More information: Patrick J. Flynn et al, Tracking the Process of Resilience: How Emotional Stability and Experience Influence Exhaustion and Commitment Trajectories, *Group & Organization Management* (2021). [DOI: 10.1177/10596011211027676](https://doi.org/10.1177/10596011211027676)

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