



Thinking job embeddedness not turnover: Towards a better understanding of frontline hotel worker retention



Richard N.S. Robinson^{a,*}, Anna Kralj^b, David J. Solnet^a, Edmund Goh^c, Victor Callan^a

^a University of Queensland, Australia

^b Griffith University, Australia

^c Blue Mountains International Hotel Management School, Australia

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ABSTRACT

This article reports the findings of a study of 327 Australian hotel frontline employees using a survey of job embeddedness. The research provides a novel application of the job embeddedness construct to the hospitality industry, not only validating the factor structure of the job embeddedness scale, but also investigating the relationship between job embeddedness and other job-related attitudes that influence employee turnover. Findings indicated that a six factor solution is the best explanation. Testing a model of the embeddedness-commitment and embeddedness-turnover relationship, the embeddedness dimensions of organizational sacrifice and community links displayed a positive relationship with organizational commitment. A negative relationship was found between organizational sacrifice and intentions to leave, while a positive relationship was found between community links and intentions to leave. One implication for hospitality managers is that there is an opportunity for hotel organizations to increase the job embeddedness of their employees by increasing the perceived costs of leaving.

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1. Introduction

Employee turnover and the high levels of labour mobility in the hospitality workforces are major issues. The consequences of employee turnover include direct and indirect costs such as recruiting and training new employees and the loss of organizational knowledge when employees leave (Hinkin and Tracey, 2006, 2008). Potential solutions to high turnover include increasing attitudes such as job satisfaction and organizational commitment (Davidson and Wang, 2011; Deery, 2008; Griffith et al., 2000). However, while increased levels of job satisfaction and organizational commitment predict lower intentions to leave, they are often poor predictors of actual turnover (Holtom and Inderrieden, 2006; Holtom et al., 2006a,b; Mitchell and Lee, 2001).

Clearly other factors are at work in terms of labour turnover, as has been noted (Jiang et al., 2012), and further research is needed in the hospitality and other industries to understand the nature and role of this broader range of factors. For example, towards developing a more robust explanation of the factors influencing intentions to leave, some investigators have begun to examine the role of off-the-job factors such as the impact of work-life balance (e.g. Deery, 2008; Karatepe and Baddar, 2006; Karatepe and Kilic, 2007).

However, in a more radical re-positioning of the research, others argue that gaps in our current understanding are associated with too great a focus upon the reasons why people leave their jobs rather than why people stay. In particular, Mitchell and his colleagues (2001) initially theorized the job embeddedness construct to account for the role of on-the-job (e.g. personal alignment with the job and organization) and off-the-job (e.g. connections with the community through history, family and social groups) factors that might influence employee attitudes and behaviours in relation to turnover. It is proposed that these factors override job attitudes that would ordinarily induce intentions to leave (Holtom & Inderrieden, 2006; Mitchell et al., 2001; Mitchell and Lee, 2001).

Since its initial conceptualization, various investigators have developed multi-dimensional and global measures of job embeddedness (e.g. Crossley et al., 2007; Holtom et al., 2006b; Lee et al., 2004; Mitchell et al., 2001). Most studies operationalize job embeddedness as a composite measure and effectively subsume the effects of different on- and off-the-job factors into an aggregate whole (e.g. Mitchell et al., 2001; Felps et al., 2009). However, global measures of job embeddedness also produce a single score for job embeddedness (e.g. Crossley et al., 2007) which provides little insight into the unique and more subtle influences upon why individuals might stay in a job. Consequently, there is continuous debate not only about the nature and structure of job embeddedness (Zhang et al., 2012), but also the conceptual distinctiveness between job embeddedness and related constructs such as

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +61 733467091.

E-mail address: richard.robinson@uq.edu.au (R.N.S. Robinson).

job satisfaction and organizational commitment, amongst others (Crossley et al., 2007; Smith et al., 2011).

The current study investigates the nature and role of job embeddedness, in particular adding to the body of research into the structure and impacts of the construct. While traditional turnover theory is premised on the notion that people will *leave* if their job satisfaction and organizational commitment are low, a job embeddedness ‘retention’ perspective contends that people will *stay*, given a particular combination of on-the-job and off-the-job factors that make leaving disadvantageous. In essence, this captures this study’s retention approach, which embraces a positive mindset towards employee organizational commitment. Firstly, the current study applied job embeddedness to the context of frontline hotel workers to test and validate the factor structure of the construct. Secondly, the relationship between the dimensions of job embeddedness and other job-related attitudes that are established predictors of employee turnover (i.e. organizational commitment and intentions to leave) was investigated. This examination of job embeddedness, in conjunction with organizational commitment and intentions to leave, examines the utility of promoting job embeddedness as an alternative approach in the retention strategies used to better manage high staff turnover among frontline hotel workers.

2. Literature review

2.1. Job embeddedness

Established theory on voluntary turnover largely stems from the work of March and Simon (1958) who posited that perceived ease (i.e. the presence of job alternatives) and desirability (i.e. level of job satisfaction) of leaving one’s job combine to predict intentions to leave. This model underpins the majority of the subsequent attitude-driven turnover research, with job satisfaction and organizational commitment being two of the most commonly operationalized variables (e.g. Maertz and Campion, 1998; Hom and Griffeth, 1995; Mitchell et al., 2001). However, while there are significant results, the effects are also weak and many argue that not enough attention has been given to alternative explanations (see Maertz and Campion, 1998).

Breaking away from this narrow focus upon attitude-driven turnover research, the job embeddedness construct proposes the role of three inter-related factors (Mitchell et al., 2001). First, non-work factors influence a person’s attachment to their work. For example, researchers such as Marshall, Chadwick and Marshall (1992) propose a ‘spillover’ model of turnover where work and family life interact. In addition, Lee and Maurer (1999) found that organizational commitment was not as strong a predictor of intention to leave as having a spouse and/or children at home. Second, other organizational factors that are not attitudinally based are empirically linked to turnover, including working with particular people or projects – these attachments to teams, groups and tasks have been labelled as ‘constituent commitments’ (Reichers, 1985). Third, the ‘unfolding model’ of turnover (Lee and Mitchell, 1994; Lee et al., 1999) challenges traditional models of turnover and describes a variety of motives for leaving one’s job, many of which are related to outside ‘shock’ factors (Morrell et al., 2004). Morrell et al. (2004) suggest that shocks, for example traumatic marital breakdowns, not only influence intention to quit but are also strongly correlated to “final straw” turnover decisions. In support of the ‘unfolding model’, negative attitudes and active job search are not strong predictors of actual turnover (Campion, 1991). Together these three literatures have positioned job embeddedness as an alternative approach to understanding the factors that shape voluntary turnover intentions and behaviours (Mitchell et al., 2001).

2.2. Dimensionality of job embeddedness

Job embeddedness is “a broad set of influences on an employee’s decision to stay on the job” (Holtom et al., 2006a, p. 319). The influences are either on-the-job (organizational embeddedness) or off-the-job (community embeddedness) and these two dimensions are independent from the traditional measures of affective commitment, job satisfaction and perceived job alternatives as validated by previous research (see Jiang et al., 2012). These two dimensions or influences, are further divided into three factors; each of which is represented once in the organizational embeddedness dimension and once again in the community embeddedness dimension. These six factors represent the factors an employee evaluates when making the decision to stay in a job: fit, links, and sacrifice. Fit is defined as: “an employee’s perceived compatibility or comfort with an organization and with his or her environment” (Holtom et al., 2006a, p. 319). Links are defined as: “formal or informal connections between an employee and institutions or people” (Holtom et al., 2006a, p. 319). Sacrifice is defined as: “the perceived cost of material or psychological benefits that are forfeited by organizational departure” (Holtom et al., 2006a, pp. 319–320).

Although the original framework (Mitchell et al., 2001) clearly explicated six facets of job embeddedness residing in two sub-dimensions, there are now competing positions about the structure of job embeddedness (Zhang et al., 2012). Over time, the construct has largely been operationalized as a composite of the two sub-dimensions of organizational and community embeddedness (Crossley et al., 2007). In this aggregate measure, each of the ‘fit’, ‘sacrifice’ and ‘link’ facets is equally weighted and averaged to form the organizational/community sub-factors, and then again to form overall embeddedness (i.e. a “mean of means”; Mitchell et al., 2001, p.1111). Generally speaking, researchers operationalize the composite measure of overall job embeddedness (e.g. Mitchell et al., 2001; Felps et al., 2009; Ng and Feldman, 2010).

However, there are various conceptual issues related to the sub-dimensions and individual facets of job embeddedness. First, mixed results in support of a direct relationship between community embeddedness and turnover could be explained by a range of factors. Zhang et al. (2012), for instance, argue that the lack of predictive validity derives from the individual facet scales that comprise the community embeddedness sub-dimension, as factors are included that do not always equate to employees feeling “stuck” in their jobs. Second, the ‘links’ facet is not yet fully considered – the underlying principles of job embeddedness suggest that the more connections an employee has, the less likely they are to leave (Mitchell et al., 2001). More is not always necessarily better, however, with more links there is a higher chance of conflicting demands (Kim et al., 1996), and the quality and structural characteristics of links must also be considered (Zhang et al., 2012). Turning to the hospitality industry, its jobs span the globe with many ‘small world’ networks (Batey and Woodbridge, 2007), and indeed these connections may actually pull employees away rather than encourage them to stay. Third, there are questions about the discriminant validity of the ‘fit’ and ‘sacrifice’ facets of job embeddedness (Zhang et al., 2012). An employee who makes an assessment that they ‘fit’ with their organization would quite likely perceive a ‘sacrifice’ if they were to leave. As a result of these issues, it is argued that combining facet scale scores into one composite score denies the unique role of each individual facet.

In the original conceptualization of job embeddedness, the direction of causality between indicator items and the latent construct was formative rather than reflective (Mitchell et al., 2001). In a formative model, responses to items combine summatively to *form* the respondent’s level on a latent construct, whereas in a reflective model, responses to items *reflect* the respondent’s level on the latent construct (Edwards and Bagozzi, 2000). However,

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