



# Life happens and people matter: Critical events, constituent attachment, and turnover among part-time hospitality employees



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## ABSTRACT

This research examined the impact of critical life events and constituent attachment on entry-level voluntary employee turnover. Specifically, this research examined the influence of three types of critical events on turnover – external personal events, external professional events, and internal work events. With a sample of 290 servers from a restaurant chain in the U.S., data on critical events and constituent attachment were collected with employee surveys, and turnover data were obtained six months afterwards from organizational records. Overall, the results demonstrated that positive and negative external personal events and positive external professional events were positively related to turnover. Meanwhile, positive internal work events and constituent attachment were negatively related to turnover, promoting retention. Furthermore, constituent attachment curbed the extent to which critical events lead to turnover. These findings highlight the importance of life events and constituents at work in explaining the employee turnover phenomenon in the hospitality industry.

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## 1. Introduction

The importance of entry-level employees in the hospitality industry is undisputed. This point is central in the often-proclaimed mantra “Employees are our greatest asset.” Not only are entry-level employees central to the service delivery process, but also they are large in number. Simply put, without high quality entry-level employees, hospitality enterprises cannot effectively meet the needs of the guest and survive in today’s competitive marketplace. Unfortunately, managing human resources, and employee turnover in particular, represents one of the most vexing problems faced by hospitality managers (Enz, 2001, 2009). Turnover rates in the hospitality industry are typically high, often exceeding 60%, creating an on-going cycle of recruitment, selection, and training (Hinkin and Tracey, 2000; Tracey and Hinkin, 2008; Wildes, 2005). Such excessive turnover strains organizations as costs escalate, productivity losses ensue, and service quality is compromised. The extent of the hospitality industry’s turnover problem is put into perspective in light of how many individuals it employs. In the U.S., the hospitality industry is the fifth largest employer (U.S. Department

of Labor, 2011). Moreover, the restaurant sector alone employs approximately 12.9 million individuals, representing 10% of the U.S. civilian workforce (National Restaurant Association, 2012).

Wasmuth and Davis’s (1983) research, published thirty years ago, represents a classic study of the causes of turnover in the hospitality industry. With a sample of employees from twenty hotel properties throughout North America and Europe, the authors found that turnover is primarily the result of factors that impact employee job satisfaction. Specifically, they demonstrated that turnover was largely a function of dissatisfaction with supervision, working conditions, and pay. More recently, Hinkin and Tracey (2000) argued that outdated human resource management practices continue to plague the hospitality industry and contribute to employee dissatisfaction and the perennial turnover challenge. They contended that employees often perform routine tasks, are given little autonomy in carrying out their work, receive poor supervision, and are typically compensated poorly for their efforts. The vast body of workplace turnover research further underscores the importance of overall job dissatisfaction and dissatisfaction with different aspects of the work environment in driving turnover (Griffeth et al., 2000). However, previous studies have only accounted for a modest percentage of variance in turnover behavior, and turnover scholars have emphasized the need for additional work that examines turnover in specific job and industry contexts (Holtom et al., 2008; Mitchell et al., 2001).

The current study will extend turnover research on entry-level employees in the hospitality industry by focusing on critical life

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events and constituent attachment. Notwithstanding the importance of job satisfaction, there is accumulating evidence that turnover may not always be a “slow burn” resulting from job dissatisfaction over time (Kammeyer-Mueller et al., 2005; Lee et al., 1996, 1999; Lee and Mitchell, 1994). Rather, critical events that occur in individuals’ lives, both inside and outside of the workplace, may create a significant moment in time that causes individuals to reconsider their employment situation and thus drive turnover. That said, critical events might not always lead to employee turnover. Some may promote retention, and some factors may protect and insulate employees from critical events that might otherwise lead to turnover. In the context of entry-level employees in the hospitality industry, we argue that constituent attachment is particularly relevant in reducing turnover. Attachment to key individuals at work, such as coworkers, may reduce the likelihood of turnover and curb the extent to which critical events lead to turnover.

The goals of this research are three-fold. First, this research will examine the extent to which three types of critical events impact employee turnover – external personal events, external professional events, and internal work events. Second, this research will assess the degree to which constituent attachment curbs turnover. Third, this research will test whether constituent attachment reduces the impact of critical events on turnover. These issues are explored with a sample of 290 servers, who are part-time employees, from 20 units of a national restaurant chain in the U.S. Focusing on part-time employees is warranted, given that a large proportion of those employed in food service are part-time workers. In fact, it is estimated that approximately 40% of individuals employed in restaurants are part-time, which is more than twice the percentage in all other employment contexts (Aspin Institute, 2012; Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2010). Ultimately, the aim of this research is to enhance our understanding of the voluntary turnover process in the hospitality industry and provide guidance for applied practice.

## 2. Theory

### 2.1. Critical events and turnover

The importance of the role of critical events in employee turnover draws on Lee and Mitchell’s (1994) unfolding model of turnover. A basic assumption in the unfolding model is that job satisfaction is only one determinant of employee turnover. Furthermore, the model proposes that individuals largely keep their jobs out of habit, but then critical events set the wheels of turnover in motion (Holtom et al., 2005). Critical events may trigger individuals to reassess their employment situation and evaluate whether their needs may be better suited by remaining with or leaving the organization. Retrospective research by Lee and colleagues that asked individuals who had already turned over why they left supports the proposition that individuals often leave because of critical events (Lee et al., 1996, 1999). In addition, research by Kammeyer-Mueller et al. (2005) demonstrated that critical events were important determinants in predicting who would leave and who would stay at a future point in time.

We argue that critical events are particularly relevant in explaining why entry-level employees in the hospitality industry turnover because they may be relatively easily dislodged. Entry-level employees in the hospitality industry represent a large proportion of the secondary labor market typified by part-time, hourly, low-skill work (Maxwell, 2008). These employees may be particularly susceptible to critical events because their jobs are not generally conducive to promoting long-term employment. They often perform routine tasks, are paid lower wages with few

benefits, receive little training, and are afforded little job security and opportunities for advancement (Brown et al., 2006; Hinkin and Tracey, 2000; Leidner, 1993; Maxwell, 2008). Furthermore, it is relatively easy for entry-level hospitality employees to obtain similar jobs with other organizations as jobs are often geographically clustered, large in number, and highly substitutable in terms of compensation and working conditions (Andersson et al., 2005; Steel, 2004). Given that there may not be “a whole lot” to promote retention, critical events are thought to be highly influential in driving turnover.

Life happens in various and diverse ways, and as such, this research will examine the effect of different types of critical events on turnover. Three general classes of critical events will serve as the basis for this study (cf. Kammeyer-Mueller et al., 2005). Namely, this study will focus on: (1) external personal events (events relating to one’s personal life occurring outside of the workplace); (2) external professional events (professional events occurring outside of the workplace not directly related to one’s current place of employment); and (3) internal work events (events occurring in the workplace relating to one’s current place of employment). External personal events include marriage, divorce or relationship break-up, birth of a child, death or serious illness of a close family member, and a spouse or partner finding a new job. External professional events include receiving job offers from other employers, starting school, and completing a degree or certification program. Finally, examples of internal work events include receiving a promotion or transfer, being given new job responsibilities, a change in supervisor, or a fight with coworkers.

Both external personal events and external professional events are proposed to lead to greater turnover. Grandey and Cropanzano (1999) assert that as more conflict is experienced in one domain of one’s life, fewer resources are available to fulfill one’s role in another. There are limited hours in the day, and employees may leave their jobs to attend to potentially more important issues in their lives (Boyar et al., 2003). External personal events may direct attention away from work and lead to an employee leaving the organization. For example, having a child, getting married, or taking care of an ill family member may lead to greater turnover because these events represent non-work activities that could create distractions for employees and direct their attention away from work (Carlson et al., 2000). Over time these events may become more important for individuals and motivate them to leave a fairly routine job with limited compensation and benefits. Similarly, external professional events may also lead to greater turnover. Events such as starting school or taking on another part-time job may divert time, energy, and focus away from workplace activities. These events create new and potentially more attractive opportunities for an employee. For example, upon graduation from college, an employee may be offered a full-time job that offers better pay and benefits. Thus, because external personal events and external professional events may consume an individual’s time (Carlson et al., 2000), they may dislodge an individual from an entry-level job where job embeddedness is fairly limited.

**Hypothesis 1.** External personal events will be positively related to turnover.

**Hypothesis 2.** External professional events will be positively related to turnover.

Regarding internal work events, events perceived as negative events are proposed to lead to greater turnover, and those perceived as positive events are proposed to lead to lower turnover. Negative internal work events are believed to contribute to greater turnover behavior because they reflect a lower quality of work life, such as when given undesirable job responsibilities, being formally disciplined, or having a major disagreement with a supervisor.

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