



An investigation into turn-away among information technology professionals in Brazil



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ABSTRACT

Two important problems have been observed fairly frequently among information technology (IT) professionals, namely turn-over – where the IT professional moves to another company but still remains in the IT sector – and turn-away, in which the IT professional abandons the area in order to occupy a position in a different area, either in the same company or in another, sometimes assuming a managerial function. Few research papers were found with respect to the latter phenomenon. Based on that, the main thrust of this work is to understand how and why IT professionals in Brazil abandon their area, identifying typical characteristics in their career transition. Thus, from a literature review about career development and the analysis of the data collected, eight research hypotheses were developed in order to be analyzed by the researchers. A multiple case study method with several units of analysis was applied in two large companies in Brazil. In-depth interviews were conducted with IT professionals who had migrated to other areas within their organizations, they being considered the unit of analysis. The results accrued from this research reveal that IT professionals in Brazil need to have more growth opportunities than either their companies have been able to offer them or it is possible to offer within the technical arena.

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1. Introduction

Inasmuch as organizations have increasingly invested in information technology (IT) and this technology has increasingly impacted their business processes (Lee, Chu, & Tseng, 2009; Meirelles, 2003), it has augmented concern with the management of IT professionals, as their hiring and training involve significant investments. According to some authors, IT personnel management is the critical variable in IT management (Barton & Martin, 1982; Lee, 2002). On the other hand, due to the intense dynamics in the IT sector, IT professionals have been strongly called upon to produce results in their professional duties, which has led them to pursue and develop greater technical capacity, flexibility and mobility (Loogma, Ümarik, & Vilu, 2004).

However, companies have had difficulties in motivating and retaining their IT professionals, as well as attaining the desired strategic IT alignment (Chan & Reich, 2007; Reich & Kaarst-Brown, 1999). Moreover, IT professionals have had difficulties in keeping themselves motivated and tackling the increasing challenges they have to deal with, as they are supposed to learn concurrently to have a strong identification with the technical area and to be highly flexible (Loogma et al., 2004). In this context, two classic problems have often been observed with respect to these professionals: turn-over – in which IT professionals move to another job without leaving the IT area – and turn-away – in which IT professionals abandon the IT area, assuming roles in other areas either within their original company or in another company, quite often assuming managerial positions (e.g. Darais, Nelson, Rice, & Buche, 2004; Joseph & Ang, 2001; Paré & Tremblay, 2007).

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Therefore, the scope of this article is to investigate the turn-away phenomenon – the IT professionals' transition to positions outside the IT sector. Extant international literature in this respect is quite scarce and most of it addresses purely the U.S. environment (e.g. Ang & Slaughter, 2000; Darais et al., 2004; Lee, 2002; Nelson, Darais, Buche, & Rice, 2001). In fact, the authors of this paper were unable to locate any literature about this specific issue related to the Brazilian context. Thus, the main thrust of this article is to investigate how and why IT professionals in Brazil move to other areas outside the IT sector, revealing the typical characteristics of this aforementioned professional transition.

The rationale for this research lies in the current shortage in Brazil of IT professionals duly trained to work in the national productive sector. This can be seen from data published by Brasscom – The Brazilian Association of ICT Companies – which forecast that in 2014 nearly 70,000 IT professionals will be required in Brazil. However, only approximately 33,000 professionals will graduate in IT due to the high evasion rate of students from the universities to the productive market (see at <http://bit.ly/JluXKf>, accessed on 05/18/2012). Besides this aforementioned shortage, the turn-away phenomenon in Brazil must also be considered, as IT professionals will move away to other areas; most of them to the managerial realm – which was overlooked in the Brasscom survey.

This study does not seek to investigate whether or not the findings – namely the barriers and enablers associated with IT professionals' turn-away in Brazil – can be generalized for other countries. Indeed, to conduct a crosscultural study it is mandatory to have enough data about the settings one intends to compare. Therefore, it is initially necessary to discover what the drivers for IT personnel transition to other careers in Brazil are, in order to be able to assess whether these drivers can be generalized for other environments, which was the main goal of this work.

In order to achieve this objective, this article is structured so as to initially set forth the literature review related to the research question as well as the research hypotheses. The methodological procedures are then presented. In the following sections the case studies are set forth and the outcomes accrued therefrom are then compared vis-à-vis the literature review adopted, in order to test the research hypothesis previously formulated. Finally, the paper highlights some managerial and academic implications accrued from this work.

2. Literature review and research hypotheses

While the knowledge area in which this paper's research problem is embedded – IT professionals' career management – has literature and theory developed since the 1970s, such material is far from abundant (Ang & Slaughter, 2000; Barton & Martin, 1982; Darais et al., 2004; Sumner et al., 2005; Turner & Baroudi, 1986), there being little empirical research in this field (Ang & Slaughter, 2000; Igbaria, Greenhaus, & Parasuraman, 1991; Lee, 2002). With respect to the transition of IT professionals to careers in other areas, the situation is even more complex, as the problem is neither well understood nor properly investigated in the IT literature (Ang & Slaughter, 2000; Nelson et al., 2001). Indeed, few recent works about this issue can be found (e.g. Allen, Armstrong, Reid, & Riemenschneider, 2009).

In the next section, the extant theoretical background literature related to the career transition of IT professionals will be examined from the perception of the IT professionals in question. Throughout this analysis, several research hypotheses to be investigated through the case studies developed in this work will be formulated.

2.1. IT career transition

The literature reveals that several factors might motivate a person to move to another professional function such as the need for professional growth, the way a professional perceives success, dissatisfaction with the current position, and the low commitment of the professionals to their companies (Darais et al., 2004; Lee, 2002; Lee, Ang, & Slaughter, 1997). As already stated, the job change can be either to another job in another company although in the same professional area, namely turn-over – or to another professional area different from the original one, namely turn-away. In the extant literature, turn-away is associated with a professional career transition within the same company. This research will follow this path, studying the IT professionals' move to another career within their original company.

The quest for professional growth is one of the factors that can lead professionals to exchange their job for another. It has often been mentioned in the literature (Darais et al., 2004; Katz & Allen, 1997; Lee, 2002; Lee et al., 1997; Turner & Baroudi, 1986) that in the technical arena the room for growth is quite small, thereby leading professionals either to move to other companies – seeking a place to grow technically – or to change to another area within their original companies – searching for areas where there is space available for professional growth. According to McLean, Smits, and Tanner (1996), before moving to another area, the IT professional tends to try to move to other companies, leaving the IT realm only after several frustrating experiences within the IT area in other companies. Lee et al. (1997) and Lee (2002) study this issue in greater depth arguing that the way the professional perceives success determines the adoption of either behavior.

The individuals can envisage professional success as well as their careers from two paradigms (Lee, 2002; Lee et al., 1997). In accordance with the career accomplishment paradigm, usually associated with technical functions, success accrues from the recognition within a closed community with a weak hierarchical structure, which is almost unintelligible for people who do not belong to it. Conversely, in accordance with the career growth paradigm, success accrues from higher positions achieved by the professionals as well as their growth within the power structure of their companies (Zabuský & Barley, 1996). Lee et al. (1997) and Lee (2002) contend that professionals who are driven by the career accomplishment paradigm are less likely to abandon the IT area than those driven by the career growth paradigm. Likewise, Reich and Kaarst-Brown (1999, 2003) verified that the

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