

AN OVERVIEW OF JOB EMBEDDEDNESS

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Nursing turnover in health care organizations is a considerable problem that needs to be reframed within the context of “nurse retention” and “job embeddedness” (JE). A construct from the business literature, JE has been associated with “retention” or “antiwithdrawal.” Conversely, turnover encompasses the process of quitting. This distinction is significant. JE represents a mediating construct between various “on-the-job” (organizational) factors, “off-the-job” (community) factors, and employee retention. This article presents an overview of JE including the dimensions, the related concepts of turnover and retention, and associated research. JE may be used to develop specific nurse-retention strategies following careful organizational and community assessment. With the current and looming nursing shortage, perhaps it is time for health care institutions to consider the adaptation of JE tenets. (Index words: Job embeddedness; Nurse retention; Nurse turnover) *J Prof Nurs* 27:320–327, 2011. © 2011 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

NURSING TURNOVER IN health care organizations is an expensive problem. The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics has projected that by 2014, the U.S. labor force will face a shortage of 1.2 million RNs (Buerhaus, 2009). Revenues are lost due to closed beds or closed units and from deferring patients elsewhere for care (Jones, 2004). Recent economic trends may help alleviate some of the nursing shortage (as the unemployment rate rises, the number of nurse vacancies decreases; Carston & Specter, 1987). However, sustained resolution of the nursing shortage may be compromised by an aging workforce (Auerbach, Buerhaus, & Staiger, 2000) and a shortage of nursing faculty (Lotas et al., 2008).

When an RN leaves, the employer loses the investment that had been made into activities such as orientation and training. Some experts estimate the total costs of one RN leaving a current position to be as much as \$67,100 (Jones, 2005). Turnover costs also involve short-term productivity losses, instability in the workforce, and use of temporary personnel. Intangible costs are associated with the disruptions to the work environment, lost customer loyalty, and impaired organizational performance (Jones, 2004). Other intangible costs include losses due to changes in organizational culture and decreased employee morale (Morrell, Loan-Clarke, & Wilkinson, 2004). Poor nursing outcomes such as

increases in length of stay, medication errors, falls and infection rates, and failure to rescue are just some of the intangible costs of turnover specific to nursing (Atencio, Cohen, & Gorenberg, 2003; Needleman, Buerhaus, Stewart, Zelevinsky, & Mattke, 2006). More importantly, high RN turnover disrupts the ability to provide quality care (Gelinas & Bohlen, 2002), especially when nurse-to-patient ratios are high (Jones, 2004).

An emphasis on increasing retention and thus decreasing turnover represents a different way of conceptualizing potential solutions to combating associated turnover costs. The identification and development of an effective approach for predicting which employees are likely to stay at their jobs could provide a foundation on which to base strategies to increase nurse retention. One promising construct borrowed from the business literature, job embeddedness (JE) has been shown to explain a larger percentage of the variance of actual nursing turnover than job satisfaction, organizational commitment, or job search models (Holtom & O'Neill, 2004; Mitchell, Holtom, Lee, Sablinsky, & Erez, 2001; Stroth, 2010).

This article presents the concept of JE and its focus on retention and proposes that JE be used to view health care employer–employee relationship. Viewing the health care employer–employee relationship through the lens of JE and its focus on retention, in addition to traditional frameworks that emphasize turnover, may help form the foundation for a comprehensive nurse-retention program.

A Different Approach: JE

JE represents a mediating construct between various “on-the-job” (organizational) factors, “off-the-job” (community) factors, and employee retention. Unlike the body of

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previous research, JE has focused on the process of retention or why an employee remains at the present job. The focus on retention, and not turnover, is important and forms the foundation for a different conceptual framework to view the employer–employee relationship. JE represents the aggregate of the constraining forces keeping employees at their current jobs (Mitchell et al., 2001). The defining attributes of JE include the fit, links, and sacrifice between an employee and the organization, and the community; JE can be measured by assessing these dimensions. The more embedded an individual is in both the organization and in the community, the more likely that the individual will remain at the current job (Holtom & O'Neill, 2004; Mitchell et al., 2001).

The core characteristics of JE may be explained using Lewin's (1951) field theory, which states that people possess a perpetual “life space,” and all aspects of their lives are represented and connected. A “field” is the “totality of coexisting facts which are conceived as mutually interdependent” (Lewin, 1951, p. 240). Individuals act according to the way in which tensions between impressions of the self and realities of the actual environment are resolved. The “lifespace” within which people behave has to be viewed to understand behavior. Individuals participate in a series of life spaces (such as the work, school, family, and church). These linkages may have many close connections or fewer distant connections (Lewin, 1951). Thus, a person with many close connections is highly embedded. The conceptual background and related research for each of the critical components of JE are explained as follows (see Table 1).

Fit

Fit can be defined as the perceived comfort level of an employee with the organization and environment. An employee's plans for the future in the current organization, career goals, and personal values are important components of the fit between an employee and the organization. Another important component of the fit between an employee and the organization includes the demands of the current job, including job knowledge, job skills, and job abilities. This attribute also concerns the fit between the employee and the surrounding community. The weather, location, amenities, political or religious

climate, and entertainment activities have been presented as relevant components of the fit between an employee and the community (Mitchell et al., 2001).

Related research that lends support for the fit dimension of JE suggests that individuals with a poor person–organization fit were more likely to leave an organization than those with a good person–organization fit (Chatman, 1991). *Job compatibility*, a concept closely related to fit, was also found to have a negative relationship to turnover (Villanova, Bernardin, Johnson, & Dahmus, 1994). The congruence of an employee's values with organizational values has also given empirical support for the fit dimension of JE (Cable & Judge, 1996). Similarly, the fit between employees and their environment or community is an important dimension of JE. However, research has shown significantly less empirical support for the community–fit dimension of JE (Lee, Mitchell, Sablinski, Burton & Holtom, 2004).

Links

The second critical attribute of JE is *links*, or the extent of associations people have with other people or activities. Links are characterized as both formal and informal connections between the employee, the community, and the current organization. Although these connections may vary in number and strength, the greater the number of connections an employee has with the community and organization, the greater the degree of JE an employee possesses. An employee who is highly embedded typically has many undifferentiated links. The physical environment, nonwork friends, work-related groups, and other groups are some of the connections that characterize the link attribute of JE (Holtom & O'Neill, 2004).

Research related to the link dimension of JE suggests that pressure from family and work colleagues are important factors that determine employees' attachment to their job (Prestholdt, Lane, & Mathews, 1987). Pressure from family may include demands to keep or change jobs and may be both overt and subtle in nature (Prestholdt et al., 1987). The importance of predictive factors such as age (older employees are less likely to leave their jobs) and tenure (more tenured employees are less likely to leave; Tai, Bame & Robinson, 1998) has been supported. Older, more tenured employees likely

Table 1. Dimensions of JE

Dimension	Organization	Community
Fit	1. Fit-organization: reflects an employee's perceived compatibility with the organization.	2. Fit-community: captures how well a person perceives he or she fits into their surrounding community and environment.
Links	3. Links-organization: formal or informal connections that exist between an employee and other people or groups in the organization.	4. Links-community: recognizes the significant influence of family and other social institutions and their influence on decision making.
Sacrifice	5. Sacrifice-organization: captures the perceived cost of material or psychological benefit forfeited when one leaves their job.	6. Sacrifice-community: captures the perceived cost of material or psychological benefit forfeited from broken links with the community when one leaves their job.

Note. Data from Mitchell et al. (2001).

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