



# Predictors of intention to turnover in behavior technicians working with individuals with autism spectrum disorder



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## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Received 22 December 2014

Received in revised form 7 June 2015

Accepted 23 June 2015

Available online 6 July 2015

### Keywords:

Turnover

Behavior technician

Autism

Applied behavior analysis

Retention

## ABSTRACT

Employee turnover has deleterious effects on clinical services such that it hinders service quality, damages the therapeutic relationship, and compromises company infrastructure. However, little is known about predictors of turnover for behavior technicians (BTs) who implement behavioral interventions with individuals with autism. Therefore, the aim of this study was to identify factors that serve as predictors of intention to turnover and provide a bedrock for direct assessment of strategies to reduce turnover among BTs. A total of 96 BTs from 19 different agencies in Southern California completed the entire online survey. We found that level of satisfaction with training, supervision, and pay (not their actual hourly pay), along with satisfaction with different aspects of the job (e.g., opportunities for advancement, praise for doing a good job) predicted BTs' intent of turnover. We discussed the potential implications of our findings for researchers interested in examining methods to minimize turnover and increase continuity of behavioral care for individuals with autism spectrum disorders.

Published by Elsevier Ltd.

## 1. Introduction

Employee turnover is a widespread source of concern for consumers of services as well as employers for several reasons. Turnover may hinder effective and efficient delivery of services (Kaff, 2004; Powell & York, 1992; Waldman, Kelly, Arora, & Smith, 2004) as remaining employees struggle to provide quality services when novice, untrained employees take the place of previous experienced colleagues (Powell & York, 1992). This disruption in the continuity of services and the reduction in service quality may negatively impact consumers' progress (Hatton et al., 2001; Hurt, Grist, Malesky, & McCord, 2013; Powell & York, 1992) or family life (Grindle, Kovshoff, Hastings, & Remington, 2009) and potentially affect parents' trust in the system of care. Turnover also impacts employers and the agencies providing support services. Specifically, losing employees and training replacements impedes productivity and places financial strain on the company (Arnold, 2005; Kiebusch, Price, & Theis, 2003; Waldman et al., 2004). When employees leave, they take with them critical knowledge they acquired over time about the work position, the agency, and the consumers (Abbasi & Hollman, 2000; Harris, Kacmar, & Witt, 2005).

Turnover rates may also lower the remaining employees' morale (Byrd, Cochran, Silverman, & Blount, 2000), increase the workload of the remaining staff, and discourage eligible individuals from applying to open positions (see Lambert, 2006).

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Consequently, agency productivity is impacted by the time it takes to recruit, train, and acclimate new hires to the work setting (Mor Barak, Nissly, & Levin, 2001). In addition, the estimated financial cost of employee turnover may be up to 150% of an employee's salary (Ramlall, 2003). Among positions earning \$30,000 or less, which included more than half of all U.S. workers between 1992 and 2007, the typical cost of turnover was 16% of an employee's annual salary (Boushey & Glynn, 2012); in best case scenarios, the cost of employee turnover has been a minimum loss of 5% of the total annual operating budget (Waldman et al., 2004). Employers need mechanisms to predict and potentially minimize employee turnover when it is voluntary, given the deleterious effects of turnover on service provision and company infrastructure.

Numerous researchers (e.g., Billingsley, 2004; Hatton et al., 2001; Hewitt, Larson, & Lakin, 2000; Larson, Lakin, & Bruininks, 1998) have examined predictors (i.e., antecedents) of turnover for special education teachers, social workers, and residential facility staff who work with children and adults with or without intellectual and developmental disabilities. It is difficult, however, for researchers to study turnover directly because it is not practical to pursue employees who quit or to conduct retrospective studies without risking hindsight bias. For these reasons, Mor Barak et al. (2001), in their review of antecedents of turnover for human service employees, reported that researchers often used turnover intentions as their outcome variable. Dalessio, Silverman, and Schuck (1986) noted that from the employer's standpoint, intention to quit may be a more important variable to predict than the actual act because the employer could possibly institute changes to affect this intention. Additionally, the authors' noted that intention to quit was a precursor of turnover and has been the single strongest predictor of actual voluntary turnover (i.e., 60% of individuals that self-reported intent to turnover actually left within one year; Dupré & Day, 2007; Lambert, 2006). Although an extensive literature base on turnover exists, little is known about potential predictors of turnover or turnover intentions for behavior technicians (BTs) who implement behavior plans directly with consumers with autism spectrum disorders (ASD). The damaging effects of turnover on consumers and employers serve as compelling reasons to investigate turnover intentions specifically with this population. Therefore, our main objective was to conduct a survey of BTs who worked with individuals with ASD to identify variables that best predicted their turnover intentions. Given the scant literature, we drew on research from similar professions (i.e., human service workers and special education teachers) in which the authors examined either turnover intentions, actual turnover of employees, or both.

### 1.1. *The BT position*

BTs are typically the front line staff in Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA)-services and they are the "paraprofessionals primarily responsible for the direct implementation of skill-acquisition and behavior-reduction plans developed by the supervisor" (Behavior Analyst Certification Board, "Definition," para. 1). BTs work in a variety of settings with various populations; however, a large proportion predominantly provide services to individuals with ASD because ABA-services are in high demand as a result of the extensive body of literature that has documented the successful use of this treatment approach for individuals with ASD and related disorders (e.g., Rogers & Vismara, 2008). The predictors of turnover for BTs who work with individuals with ASD may differ from other professionals (e.g., special education teachers) and paraprofessionals (e.g., staff at residential facilities) for several reasons. First, impairments in communication and reciprocal social interactions coupled with a restricted repertoire of activities and interests (American Psychiatric Association, 2000) set individuals with ASD apart from other individuals with special needs. Second, BTs are largely dependent on higher level staff for training and supervision because they are typically relatively inexperienced front line staff who work face-to-face for extended periods of time with consumers, sometimes up to 40 h a week (Howard, Sparkman, Cohen, Green, & Stanislaw, 2005; Hurt et al., 2013). Finally, BTs provide services in the context(s) in which consumers require support, for example in schools or in homes. Therefore, BTs frequently interact with other adults, for example teachers or parents, who may be stressed (Hastings & Johnson, 2001) and leery about the BTs' presence in their environments (Grindle et al., 2009). Given the challenging nature of the position, it is not surprising that researchers have found that BTs self-report high levels of job stress and burnout and low levels of job satisfaction and personal accomplishment, (Griffith, Barbakou, & Hastings, 2014; Hurt et al., 2013; Jennett, Harris, & Mesibov, 2003), which have all been correlated with voluntary employee turnover in other professions (see Billingsley, 2004).

### 1.2. *Turnover of staff in similar professions*

#### 1.2.1. *Predictors of turnover for direct support employees in residential facilities*

Turnover rates for direct support employees working with adults with intellectual disabilities in community residential facilities have been quite high (Hatton et al., 2001). The annual rate of voluntary turnover ranged from 45% to 75% (Hewitt, Larson, & Lakin, 2000; Larson, Lakin, & Bruininks, 1998), which was significantly higher than the average yearly voluntary turnover rates (i.e., approximately 17.9% in 2011) across all industries (Boushey & Glynn, 2012). Although sample sizes and measures to capture turnover in this population have varied extensively across studies, Larson et al., (1998) reported that researchers have identified various factors that serve as predictors of turnover or turnover intent, including employee characteristics (e.g., younger or more educated employees) and resident characteristics (e.g., challenging behavior). Compared to employees who remain, employees who intend to turnover reported less satisfaction with their income or benefits, low staff-to-client ratios, less satisfaction with on-the-job training, difficulties with or lack of support from supervisors (i.e., practical or emotional support), low levels of feedback on job performance, and low levels of general job

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