



## Flexible employment and nurses' intention to leave the profession: The role of support at work

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### ABSTRACT

**Objectives:** The objectives of this paper are to examine (1) the association between flexible employment and nurses' intention to leave the profession, and (2) whether or not support at work mediates the association between flexible employment and nurses' intention to leave the profession. Flexible employment is analyzed objectively using non-permanent contract, part-time employment status, casual employment status, involuntary hours and on-call work, and subjectively using job insecurity. Support at work refers to organizational, supervisor and peer support.

**Methods:** Data come from our survey of 1396 nurses employed in three teaching hospitals in Southern Ontario. Descriptive statistics are provided. Bivariate correlations, hierarchical regression analysis and mediation tests are conducted.

**Results:** Compared to those in full-time employment, nurses in part-time employment do not intend to leave the profession. None of the other objective flexible employment factors are associated with intention to leave the profession. Perceived job insecurity is associated with intention to leave the profession. Low support at work contributes to intention to leave the profession and mediates the association between job insecurity and intention to leave the profession.

**Conclusions:** The study provides evidence to health sector managers and policy makers that part-time employment, perceived job security and support at work are important factors to consider in efforts to retain nurses in the profession.

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### 1. Introduction

The objectives of this paper are to examine (1) the association between flexible employment and nurses' intention to leave the profession, and (2) whether or not support at work mediates the association between flexible employment and nurses' intention to leave the profession. Flexible employment is gaining importance globally in the health care sector since prescribed by the international financial

institutions [1]. The term flexibility connotes both positive and negative attributes. In the last three decades two streams of flexibility literature emerged along these two opposing views [2]. One stream of literature discusses flexibility as a strategic initiative of employers to enhance the business requirements of the firm. The other stream of literature discusses flexibility as driven by employees demanding flexibility for work-life balance interests. Research using national level data from the U.S. and Canada shows that flexible employment is created for business reasons rather than meeting employee interests and needs [3,4]. This study takes the perspective that flexible employment is primarily demand-driven and created for the interests and goals of the hospitals and hospital

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administrators. Nurse managers implement these hospital employment policies. Nurses respond to flexible job opportunities created by the administration and attempt to find a good match between their interests and available jobs.

The health care sector in Canada and elsewhere experienced restructuring in mid-1990s and as a result hospital management introduced a number of flexible employment forms and involuntary hours with little job security [5–9]. Some nurses left the profession and others intend to leave [5,10]. In 2002, the year our study was conducted, only 60% of nurses worked full-time [11,12]. That year the provincial government initiated a policy to create more full-time jobs to keep nurses in the profession. Many of the nurses searching a full-time job found one, and many of the nurses working on a part-time basis chose to stay in part-time jobs. More investments were made to enhance the number of nurses working on a full-time basis. In addition, in the last few years, the provincial government guaranteed full-time employment to recent graduates, if they preferred.

Labour supply and demand imbalances in nursing are creating retention challenges [10,13–15]. Decision-makers are noting that work environment issues are factors of concern for retention in health care sector [16] and generally in the labour market [17] making the topic of this paper important and timely. This study contributes to the literature by examining a large number of objective flexible employment factors and a subjective flexible employment factor in the analysis, and by examining the role of support at work as a possible mediator of the relationship between these factors and intention to leave the profession. Findings can assist organizational level policy-making in hospitals. Findings can also inform decision-makers at national and intergovernmental organizations on retaining nurses in the profession.

## 2. Turnover intention theory and the conceptual model

Retention and turnover are two sides of a coin [18]. Turnover is the ultimate decision preceded by the intention to leave [19]. The turnover theory shows that objective job circumstances and interpreted job circumstances affect an individual's decision to leave or stay in the organization [20,21] or the profession [22]. Nurses have a strong identification with their profession [23] and intention to leave the profession is a serious decision since it means leaving behind the training in nursing, a dedication to the profession and possibly tenure in the profession. Thus, we focus on this ultimate decision for a nurse — the intention to leave the profession (see Fig. 1).

Flexible employment is examined on objective and subjective dimensions similar to DeWitte and Näswall's study of job insecurity [24]. The objective flexible employment dimensions of non-permanent contract, part-time employment status, casual employment status, involuntary hours and on-call work are indicators that these jobs are in the periphery of the organizations with poor working conditions and insecurity [3,25]. Empirical research on employment statuses shows hierarchies within the periphery with part-time employment being in the near-core and providing some flexibility, and casual employment providing the most flexibility [25]. Applying the theory of turnover intention to our study [20,21], nurses would examine the objective working conditions in their jobs in deciding whether to stay or leave the profession. For a skilled profession like nursing, employment in non-permanent contracts, casual employment, involuntary hours or on-call work may not be their preference after years of training for the profession. Considering that these

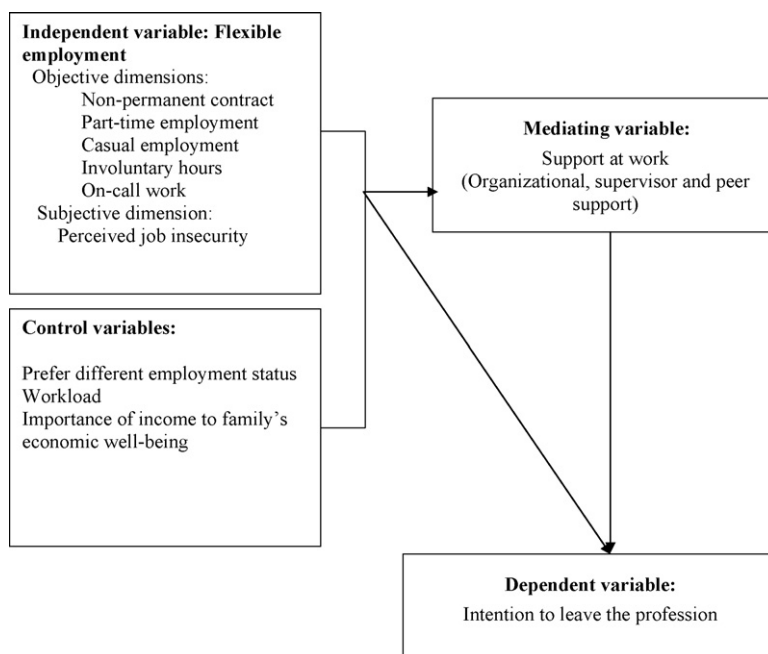


Fig. 1. The conceptual model of the associations between employment flexibility, support at work and intention to leave the profession.

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