



## Is retention necessarily a win? Outcomes of searching and staying



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### ABSTRACT

This research examines the issue of employee retention by considering what happens to employees that engage in the job search process yet end up staying with an organization. Grounded in the conceptualization of reluctant staying from Hom, Mitchell, Lee, and Griffeth (2012), we consider a potential downside of employee retention. Specifically, the study examines the psychological (i.e., job dissatisfaction, low organizational commitment) and behavioral detachment (i.e., neglect behavior, diminished job performance) employees may experience when they search for alternative employment yet ultimately stay with an organization. This study also examines the moderating role of the objective underlying the search behavior on job search and its criteria, arguing that the strength of the search-criteria link varies depending upon an employee's objective "to leave" the current employer. Results suggest an increase in psychological detachment and greater neglect behavior for employees that searched and stayed. These findings were not dependent on the reported objective "to leave" the employer. Implications for research on job search activity and withdrawal are discussed.

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Researchers and managers have long sought to investigate the cost of employee turnover. The academic literature on employee turnover is fairly established, offering a great deal of insight on the predictors (e.g., individual difference and situational factors; Griffeth, Hom, & Gaertner, 2000) and the process of employee withdrawal and turnover. Research has also begun to examine the converse of employee turnover decisions, focusing on why employees stay with an organization (e.g., embeddedness; Mitchell, Holtom, Lee, Sablynski, & Erez, 2001). Challenging the conventional wisdom that employees want either to simply stay ('non-exit') or to leave ('exit') (e.g., Hirschman, 1970), we believe there is an existence of a middle ground—people stay while their mind-set is already gone. Thus, an important element of understanding the employee retention process and the implications for organizations is to consider what happens to employees that engage in the withdrawal process yet end up staying with an organization (Boswell, Zimmerman, & Swider, 2012). That is, what are the consequences when employees that seek to leave an organization end up remaining? Is this type of retention a "win" for the employer or might there be subsequent effects associated with the withdrawal process?

The purpose of this study is to examine the work-related outcomes of job search activity among employees that do not leave an organization (i.e., "stayers"). More specifically, we investigate the effects of searching for alternative employment yet not leaving on subsequent employee attitudes (i.e., job satisfaction and organizational commitment) and behaviors (i.e., neglect and performance). We acknowledge that much of the job search research has investigated how job attitudes such as satisfaction and commitment serve as antecedents to job search (Blau, 1994; Bretz, Boudreau, & Judge, 1994; van Hoof, Born, Taris, van

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der Flier, & Blonk, 2004). However, drawing on a work withdrawal framework (Hanisch & Hulin, 1990, 1991; Hulin, 1990) and related research on an expanded conceptualization of the turnover domain (Boswell et al., 2012; Hom, Mitchell, Lee, & Griffeth, 2012), we argue that employees that seek to leave their employer yet do not leave the organization are likely to engage in other withdrawal-related behavior to adapt to the situation of staying with that employer. We examine both general search activity linked to subsequent consequences of not leaving as well as the specific job search intention of “searching to leave” (Boswell, Boudreau, & Dunford, 2004).

Accordingly, this research offers three key contributions to our understanding of employee job search and withdrawal. First, by focusing on an often neglected group of individuals in the job search literature (namely, employees that stay rather than leave) and responding to the call for offering insight as to job search behavior in different populations of job seekers (Boswell et al., 2012), we shed light on the consequences of search behavior beyond simply leaving an organization. Prior work has emphasized the importance of examining consequences to employee withdrawal cognitions and search activity other than turnover (Hom et al., 2012), yet few studies have considered the effects on an array of employee attitudes and behaviors. Second, and related, we propose and investigate that retention may not necessarily be a “win” for an organization. That is, although the costs of turnover are fairly well known, this study considers the potential downside of employees staying. Related, this research expands the theory and research on employee withdrawal and consequent reactions (cf. Hom et al., 2012) linked to job search activity, recognizing that individuals may react to their employment situation through different types of attitudinal responses and adaptive behaviors. Finally, by also examining the objective underlying the search activity to subsequent reactions, this study contributes to a growing literature that suggests individuals search with varying goals in mind and that incorporating those goals to models of job search may offer new insights and precision in understanding the search process and the subsequent consequences.

## 1. Employee job search

Job search involves the expenditure of effort to acquire information about labor market alternatives and generate employment opportunities (Boswell, 2006). Job search activity (also referred to as job search *behavior*) is a key component of many turnover models, often viewed as the most proximal determinant of turnover (e.g., Griffeth et al., 2000; Hom & Griffeth, 1991; Mobley, 1977; Mobley, Griffeth, Hand, & Meglino, 1979; Steers & Mowday, 1981). Research has also recognized that search does not always precede turnover (i.e., a “shock” may lead an individual to quit without searching, Lee & Mitchell, 1994; Lee, Mitchell, Wise, & Fireman, 1996) and certainly not all employees that search for alternative employment end up leaving the current employer. Indeed, although the strongest behavioral predictor to voluntary turnover, the average weighted correlation between job search and turnover is moderate ( $r = 0.26$ ; Griffeth et al., 2000). Yet the basic argument is that discontent with the current employment situation leads to withdrawal cognitions and a search for and evaluation of alternatives.

A question arises as to what helps explain the modest correlation between search and turnover; that is, why wouldn't search activity necessarily lead to turnover? Whether search activity generates viable options (“successful job search” Mobley et al., 1979; Steers & Mowday, 1981), and thus having the opportunity to leave, is arguably a key mitigating factor. Indeed, ability to leave stems back to March and Simon's (1958) seminal model of employee turnover whereby ease of movement was proposed as a key determinant (along with desirability) to ensuing turnover. Movement ease (or opportunity to leave, Bretz et al., 1994) may stem from labor market conditions (e.g., job, industry, or regional unemployment) and/or an individual's own human capital (e.g., skills, abilities, education, experience) as well as a comparison of alternatives generated to the current job. In an empirical examination of this, Swider, Boswell, and Zimmerman (2011) found a moderating role for alternative opportunities (both unemployment rate and perceived alternatives) on the search-turnover link such that search was most likely to lead turnover within the context of a stronger labor market. The researchers also emphasized the importance of *viable* alternatives, proposing and finding that the more satisfied and/or embedded an individual is with a current employer, the more difficult it may be for him/her to obtain alternative employment more favorable to the current job or that overcomes the costs and sacrifices of leaving. Taken together, prior empirical work and theorizing suggests not only that search may not lead to subsequent turnover but that there are likely important implications for an individual that ends up staying with the organization.

In this study, we propose that searching and not leaving is likely to be met with discontent on the part of the job seeker. Although some individuals may search with little intent or desire to actually leave (an issue we develop and examine below in our moderating hypothesis), our baseline expectation is that searching and not leaving will generally equate as a failed search. This is akin to prior discussions of “intention-to-quit nonquitters” (Bowen, 1982) or more recently as “reluctant stayers” (Hom et al., 2012) whereby the individual sought alternative employment but does not leave. Although the present research does not specifically examine the reason why the employee stays (e.g., high embeddedness constraining viability of alternatives, inability to secure unemployment due to low human capital), we argue that as some level of discontent with the current employment situation would drive one's desire to seek out alternatives, remaining in the current situation would be met with negative attitudes and deleterious behaviors as an individual is in essence “blocked from leaving” (Hom et al., 2012, p. 836).

Also discussed as “dysfunctional retention” (Schiemann, 2009), prior work on employee withdrawal has contrasted the nature of employee withdrawal – physically withdrawing from the job and organization (exit-related withdrawal; e.g., Boswell & Olson-Buchanan, 2004; Hanisch & Hulin, 1990) or remaining part of the organization but psychologically distant and/or engaging in adverse work behaviors such as work avoidance or diminished performance (Boswell & Olson-Buchanan, 2004; Greenhalgh, 1980; Hom et al., 2012). We would expect that as the former withdrawal (exit/turnover) is in some way thwarted and the employee is entrapped in the current situation, he/she is likely to adapt through an alternative withdrawal mechanism, maintaining the work-role relationship while exhibiting adverse attitudes and behaviors.

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