



Career anchors and disturbances in job turnover decisions – A case study of IT professionals in Taiwan

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 19 June 2011

Received in revised form 29 July 2012

Accepted 10 August 2012

Available online 20 August 2012

Keywords:

Career anchors

Job turnover

Social identity

Job satisfaction

ABSTRACT

Previous models of turnover by IT professionals consider job satisfaction as a key indicator. One common model considers whether an organization matches the internal anchors of IT employees to provisions in the work place. This pattern is often broken by other considerations that disturb the relationship between job satisfaction and intent to seek employment elsewhere. Such disturbances present a problem in planning and are not globally considered in research models. A qualitative study of ten cases yields new insight into the disturbances that break the pattern leading to a more general model of turnover.

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1. Introduction

Information technology (IT) personnel continue to exhibit high rates of turnover [1]. IT departments have difficulties retaining individuals with current skills [16]. IT projects suffer due to losing key technology personnel. Loss of key IT personnel is particularly problematic for organizations that strive to utilize technology to achieve competitive parity or advantage through advanced systems [46]. For these and other reasons, keeping IT personnel is crucial, yet practices deployed for personnel in other disciplines may not be appropriate [14]. IT jobs exhibit characteristics of spanning functional boundaries, demanding constant learning to remain current with technological advance, and possess pressures of time and budget constrained projects that can differ from more traditional jobs within an organization [18]. IT personnel also differ from other employees in their backgrounds, expectations and behaviors. These all combine to make further understanding of turnover among IT personnel crucial.

Past studies consider the characteristics of IT jobs and the turnover responses by IT personnel [25]. They consider job traits and conditions such as autonomy, emotional environments,

rewards, and demands that lead to feelings of burnout, less job satisfaction, and turnover intentions. The basis of any advice is to modify the working environment to lower burnout, increase satisfaction, and reduce intention to leave the job. These models, however, fail to consider more individual needs of the IT professional. To compensate, other researchers consider turnover intent to be an outcome of an organization's failure to satisfy the more personal needs of the individual in the provision of the job characteristics or workplace environment [4,32]. This perspective relies on the concept of internal career anchors [41]. Internal career anchors represent the wants and desires of individuals that must be fulfilled by a job.

Anchors for IT personnel include autonomy, creativity, managerial competence, technical competence, organizational stability, geographic security, identity, service, variety, lifestyle, challenge, entrepreneurship, and learning motivation (see Appendix for definitions) [3–6,20]. Individuals look to organizations to satisfy these anchors with “external opportunities” in the workplace, where external is relative to the individual and opportunity relative to job characteristics potentially satisfying the anchors. An organization must provide these external opportunities as incentives consistent with underlying career values, because according to discrepancy theories, a failure to satisfy the more important anchors results in lessened job satisfaction and an intention to seek other employment [22]. This pattern is also maintained when employees stay with jobs that satisfy their anchors because there is no perceived discrepancy to the external

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	Intent to Turnover	No Intent to Turnover
Satisfied	I. Unidentified	II. Provisions Satisfy Anchors
Not Satisfied	IV. Provisions Fail to Satisfy Anchors, Opportunities Exist	III. Provisions Fail to Satisfy Anchors, Lack of Opportunity

Fig. 1. Turnover intent in the IT literature.

opportunities present in the position held. These patterns are represented by quadrants IV and II respectively in Fig. 1.

Though career anchors tend to provide a good explanatory model, disturbances to the pattern are not uncommon [32]. Satisfied IT professionals still leave their organizations even when there is no significant gap between their wants and external opportunities while some unsatisfied IT professionals remain with their current organization [4]. A common explanation for staying with a job while unsatisfied is the perception that job opportunities outside the current organization do not exist [26]. This condition is a disturbance to the pattern of turnover models shown in quadrant III of Fig. 1, but well documented and understood. However, the external job market is only one possible disturbance to the typical pattern of turnover intention. Consideration of leaving a job that satisfies the needs of an individual is not made by researchers, leaving a major portion of the picture unidentified as represented in quadrant I of Fig. 1. As with the disturbance of poor external job opportunity explaining the decision to stay with a job when discrepancies exist between provisions and anchors, we consider the possibility of disturbances also causing IT personnel to switch jobs when their anchors are being satisfied by the organization and extend the model of current thought to consider a broader perspective of possible disturbances.

The focus of this study is, therefore, to examine how IT personnel turnover decisions are disturbed by factors external to the relationship between the employee and the organization. Just what considerations lead an IT professional to switch jobs when they are satisfied with the job; i.e. when their internal career

desires are satisfied by their organizations? Based upon a multiple-case study, results suggest that discrepancies, deficiency gaps of specific anchors to the perceived external opportunities provided by the employing organization, successfully explain an IT professional's turnover intentions. Exceptions to the discrepancy model are found in external conditions, including personal identification with the IT profession, family obligations, and substantial gain not attainable within their organization. This study provides further insight to our understanding of career anchor discrepancies as well as disturbances to the patterns set forth by career anchor models.

2. Background

A career is viewed as a sequence of work-related jobs that an individual experiences in his or her lifetime [15]. Career anchors are an individual's self-perception of his or her talents and abilities, needs and motives, and attitude and values established at certain levels [7,41]. Discrepancy theory applies to career anchors in that individual satisfaction is determined as the gap between the individual's wants and that provided by the organization; the magnitude defined by specific levels of each anchor and the perceived provision level of the employing organization [33]. The closer the match between organizational provision and individual want, the higher the job satisfaction, leading to a lessened turnover intention [21]. To retain good IT employees, organizations should attempt to provide incentives, environments, and jobs that are consistent with underlying anchors [3,12].

Nevertheless, empirical evidence indicates that IT personnel turnover regardless their level of satisfaction, while others stay when dissatisfied [3,8]. One explanation is the availability of job alternatives. Although job dissatisfaction will induce turnover intention, employees will decrease their turnover intention because they perceive an unfavorable job market [19,28]. Perceived job alternatives are modeled by researchers to moderate the effect between general job satisfaction and turnover intention [47]. Fig. 2 shows the relations as currently represented in the literature. Satisfaction is determined by discrepancies between wants represented by career anchors and perceptions of how much of each anchor is provided by their job. Satisfaction is a direct input to turnover intention.

Other external factors may explain breaks in the pattern. Outside employment opportunities remain a possible factor if the firm competing for the services of an IT professional can dislodge the current anchors with a career shift, offer a substantial increase to an anchor or reward beyond current levels of satisfaction, provide an outside career opportunity that may not be an open path in the current organization, or provide a chance to advance new knowledge relevant to the future of the IT discipline. For example, effective IT career management should develop

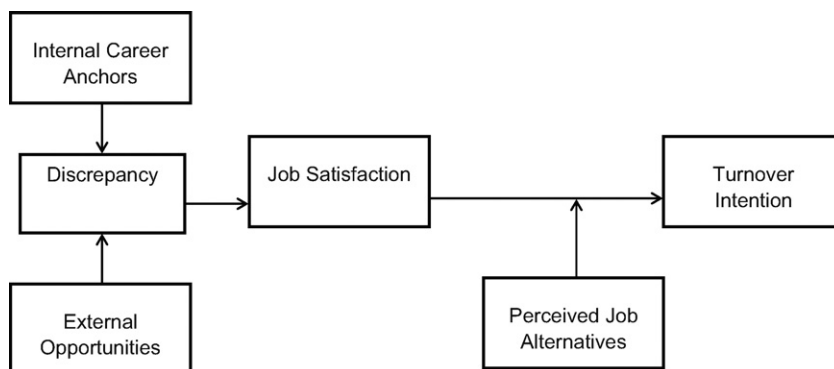


Fig. 2. Discrepancy based satisfaction and turnover intention.

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