Factors influencing turnover in GenX nurses: Results of an Australian survey

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ABSTRACT

Background: The retirement transition phase for the estimated 80,000–100,000 Australian Generation X nurses is due to begin in 2025, the year by which it is estimated that at least 110,000 nurses are required for the viability of the Australian health workforce. The need to evaluate their intention to turnover will inform part of the solution to a potential nationwide workforce crisis.

Objectives: To evaluate the factors contributing to job satisfaction and their influence on the turnover intention of Australian Generation X nurses.

Design: Cross sectional, web based survey of Generation X nurses currently employed in Australian health care.

Setting and participants: The convenience sample consisted of Australian Registered Nurses (RNs) born between 1965 and 1980 employed in health facilities across Australia.

Methods: A survey was distributed online between June-July 2015. Exploratory descriptive statistics were generated from survey data to identify perceived positive or negative aspects of the work environments for Generation X nurses. Correlation analysis was performed to investigate the strength and direction of the relationships between scales and subscales of the survey to turnover intention.

Results: A total of 208 participants from all states and territories of Australia completed the survey. Generation X nurses reported moderately positive perceptions of their job satisfaction and work environment, and survey measures of commitment (Affective, Continuance and Normative) revealed that nurse respondents feel moderately involved in their organisation. Empowerment scales indicated nurses were moderately empowered psychologically, but were only somewhat empowered by their work structures. Participants' intention to turnover scores were neutral, indicating no clear positive or negative intention to leave their job in the near future. All survey scales were negatively and statistically significantly correlated with the intention to turnover (r range −0.549 to −0.404, all p < 0.05). Most subscales were also significantly negatively correlated with turnover (all r −0.547 to −443, p range <0.01–0.05) with the exception of the Continuance commitment subscale, which was positively correlated with intention to turnover (r = 0.474, p < 0.01). Work pressure, Control and Affective commitment scales were not significantly associated with turnover intention (r 0.052–0.184, p > 0.05).

Conclusions: In general, Generation X nurses were reasonably satisfied with many aspects of their work environment. However, particular features of the work place, such as opportunities for professional interactions, interpersonal relationships between colleagues and managerial support, were associated with an increased intention to turnover.

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Summary of relevance

- Retention of current GenX nurses is part of the solution to a potential nationwide workforce crisis.

- By 2025, estimated shortfalls projected by the Health Workforce Australia (2012) signal it will be necessary to increase supply of Australian registered nurses by 27% (109 000 nurses).
- Registrant data (2015) obtained from the Australian Health Practitioner Regulation Agency in partnership with the Nursing and Midwifery Board of Australia estimates that there are over 94,000 Australian RNs in the GenX age group.

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- As the generation sandwiched between the larger Baby Boomer and Generation Y cohorts, Generation X (GenX) nurses are the least written about. Now aged between 36 and 51 years, GenX nurses are about to replace Baby Boomer nurses as the latter group transition to retirement.
- Generational specific characteristics are held constant and have an effect on perceptions of job satisfaction, organisational commitment and empowerment.
- Current work environments are not conducive to Generation X working practices: the nursing work environment is considered to be no exception.

- Specific aspects of job satisfaction for Generation X nurses are work environment and organisational commitment.
- Psychological and structural empowerment are associated with turnover intention.
- Generation X nurses feel that they must stay in their current jobs, reporting social and economic reasons for staying in their work.

1. Introduction

Generations are cohorts of people who share milestones and key social influential definers (Howe & Strauss, 1991). Similar life events and political environments shared among Generation X (GenX) have influenced behaviours which in turn develop traits in values, beliefs and attitudes in relation to work (Hansen & Leuty, 2012). The literature is not consistent in defining birth year ranges for Generation X but, for the purposes of this study, a GenX Registered Nurse (RN) in 2016 is aged between 35 and 51 years old (born between 1965 and 1980), having entered the workforce between the mid 1980s and mid 1990s.

There is a paucity of research concerning Australian GenX nurses and their intent to remain in nursing. Health workforce agencies and the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) identify the average age of the clinical nurse to be around 39 years, coinciding with the Generation X cohort (ABS, 2005; Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2012). The 2015 report of registrant data by the Australian Health Practitioner Regulation Agency (AHPRA), in partnership with the Nursing and Midwifery Board of Australia (NMBA), estimates that there are over 94, 000 Australian RNs in the GenX age group (NMBA, 2015).

In keeping with global trends, an Australian nursing shortage is expected by 2025 (Buchan, Duffield, & Jordan, 2015; Duffield, Roche, Homer, Buchan, & Dimitrelis, 2014). This will have a direct influence on health care costs and patient outcomes, and secondary impacts on an organisation's ability to attract and retain their nursing staff. Currently Australia loses up to one in five of its nurses annually, with estimated shortfalls signaling it will be necessary to increase supply by 27% (or 109,000 RNs) by 2025 (Health Workforce Australia, 2012). Health Workforce Australia (HWA) has reiterated the urgency to retain at least 20% of the current nursing working workforce in order to meet demand by this time (HWA, 2012, p.2). The aim of this study is to examine and evaluate the factors contributing to job satisfaction among Australian GenX nurses and how job satisfaction influences their intent to turnover, a deliberate decision to leave the employing organisation.

An investigation of generational workforce research resulted in the development of a survey instrument capable of capturing comprehensive perceptions of job satisfaction and work environment of currently employed GenX nurses (Christopher et al., 2016). The Australian GenX Nurses (AGENX) Survey was distributed online to evaluate perceptions of job satisfaction (JS), organisational commitment (OC), work environment (WE), psychological (PE) and structural empowerment (SE) and the intent to turnover (TO) in currently employed Australian GenX nurses. The study sought to identify the work perceptions of this generation to assist in the development of retention strategies.

2. Methods

This paper reports the quantitative component of a wider prospective cross sectional mixed method study.

2.1. Sample and setting

Criteria for eligibility to participate in this study included being an Australian RN born between 1965 and 1980 and working full time, part time or casually in an Australian health care facility. A convenience sample was indirectly recruited through an email contact strategy developed with the Coalition of National Nursing and Midwifery Organisations (CoNNMO). CoNNMO consists of over fifty specialist Australian nursing and midwifery organisations from various areas of practice. Using its existing distribution list of member organisations, CoNNMO circulated the email invitation for further distribution by the individual specialist nursing organisations. The email contained an embedded web link to the survey hosted by SurveyMonkey.

2.2. Survey construction

The web based AGENX survey combined six valid and reliable survey tools (described below) with an eight item demographic survey and one open-ended question to collect data from Australian Generation X nurses. The final survey consisted of 128 items, comprising 127 closed items and one open ended question. Qualitative analysis of the open text responses is beyond the scope of this paper. Permission to use the copyrighted material was obtained from each of the tool developers.

2.2.1. Job satisfaction (JS)

Conceptually, JS refers to the degree to which employees like their job (Streiner, 2003). The Mueller McCloskey Satisfaction Scale (MMSS) was initially developed to measure hospital nurses' job satisfaction levels in 1974 using a sample of nurses who had resigned from jobs to compile a list of factors perceived to have kept them in their job (Cresswell & Piano Clark, 2011). The list ranked rewards to stay in work into three distinct domains: *Safety*, *Social* and *Psychological* (Dignani & Toccaceli, 2013). The MMSS was refined in 1987, reflecting contemporary knowledge about what would keep nurses professionally satisfied and committed (Mueller & McCloskey, 1990). Internal consistency reliability (Cronbach's alpha) for the MMSS total scale and subscales has been reported as 0.52–0.90 (Mueller & McCloskey, 1990; Van Saane, Sluiter, Verbeek, & Frings-Drese, 2003). JS is known to be associated with the work environment (Wilkin, 2013).

2.2.2. Work environment (WE)

GenX nurses are vulnerable to increased turnover rates (Coshow, Davis, & Wolosin, 2009) and past research has reported their feelings of being undervalued by both younger and older nurses (Blythe et al., 2008) and by the organisations they work for (De Gieter, Hofmans, & Pepermans, 2011). Work environment refers to the space in which people carry out a paid activity (Beutell, 2010). The Work Environment Scale (WES) consists of 10 subscales identifying three work environment dimensions: *Relationship* is comprised of a set of three subscales and evaluates *Involvement*, *Co-worker cohesion* and *Supervisor support*; *Personal Growth* measures *Autonomy*, *Task orientation* and *Work pressure*; the third WES dimension, *System Maintenance and Change* is evaluated by *Clarity*, *Managerial control*, *Innovation* and *Physical comfort*. **The WES tool developer R.H.** Moos (1994) identified internal consistency