Prior and future withdrawal and performance: A meta-analysis of their relations in panel studies

Brian W. Swider [a,*], Ryan D. Zimmerman [b]

[a] Georgia Institute of Technology, USA
[b] Virginia Tech, USA

A B S T R A C T

While consensus exists among researchers that withdrawal and performance are related, the ordering of these constructs in proposed models frequently varies based on the theoretical focus of the study. Specifically, several extant well-being theories predict employee withdrawal will affect future performance while several turnover theories predict employee performance will affect future withdrawal. This study systematically addresses these complementary theories by conducting a meta-analysis of panel studies measuring both withdrawal and performance at two or more time periods. After accounting for sampling and measurement error, meta-analytic regression results indicate that performance is significantly negatively related to future withdrawal ($\rho = -.19$) even after accounting for prior withdrawal ($\beta = -.03$). However, the relationship between withdrawal and future performance ($\rho = -.20$) disappeared after accounting for prior performance ($\beta = .00$), although burnout did predict future performance even after accounting for prior performance ($\beta = -.07$).

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1. Introduction

In a recent large-scale survey of HR professionals, retaining and optimizing human capital were identified as the biggest challenges and investment areas facing HR executives over the next decade (SHRM, 2012). These concerns are not new; researchers have spent the better part of a century identifying antecedents of either performance or withdrawal in an effort to facilitate improvements in employee productivity and retention. Given the critical importance of performance and withdrawal to both practitioners and researchers, it is not surprising that the relationship between these two constructs has received considerable research attention and serves as a key linkage in several prominent organizational literatures (e.g., employee well-being and turnover). Results from various meta-analyses confirm employee performance is negative related to withdrawal and the negative relationship holds across all job settings (Viswesvaran, 2002; Zimmerman & Darnold, 2009). Interestingly, the copious amount of research on the relationship between employee performance and withdrawal has developed in two distinct, but complementary, research areas with each focusing almost exclusively on the unique effect of one construct on the other (e.g., withdrawal on future performance) while overlooking the opposite effect (e.g., performance on future withdrawal).

Specifically, scholars focused on employee well-being often develop theories and test hypotheses stating that employees who cognitively or physically remove themselves from work (i.e., experiencing withdrawal) are expected to become worse performers in the future compared to employees who are not experiencing withdrawal (e.g., Wright & Bonett, 1997). Conversely, employees who are not experiencing withdrawal are expected to be focused and effortful when engaging in work tasks, improving subsequent performance levels. However, turnover researchers often model these constructs in opposite positions temporally, focusing instead on the influence of performance on future withdrawal. That is, many turnover theories argue that performance predicts future withdrawal as lower performance levels should lead employees to consider leaving the organization (Allen &

Griffeth, 1999). Additionally, turnover researchers expect high performing employees to generate greater rewards stemming from their productivity and thus become less likely to withdraw from the organization in the future (Steers & Mowday, 1981). From a review of these two literatures, it is clear that a relationship between performance and withdrawal is both critical and expected. However, what remains unclear is the strength of the relationships between withdrawal and performance and future performance and withdrawal, respectively. Additionally, given the within-individual consistency of both withdrawal and performance over time (e.g., Kammeyer-Mueller, Wanberg, Glomb, & Ahlburg, 2005; Sturman, Cheramie, & Cashen, 2005), it is of great importance to both well-being and turnover literatures to establish the unique predictive power withdrawal has on future performance as well as the unique predictive power performance has on future withdrawal, respectively.

The purpose of this study is to distinguish the influence of job performance on employee future withdrawal from the influence of withdrawal on future job performance. Extant cross-sectional primary studies and meta-analyses, while extensive, are neither able to reach definitive conclusions concerning the effect of withdrawal (performance) on subsequent performance (withdrawal), nor are they able to control for prior performance (withdrawal). Yet, meta-analyses based on panel studies have been shown to be an extremely effective way of understanding the strength of the relationships between two temporally separated constructs, as well as estimating incremental predictive validity after accounting for previous attitudes and behaviors, in addition to correcting for sampling and measurement error (e.g., Riketta, 2008). Thus, to better understand the unique influence of withdrawal and performance on future performance and withdrawal, panel studies involving multiple measurements of withdrawal and performance were collected, meta-analyzed, and fit to regressions controlling for baseline withdrawal or performance. Resulting estimates help determine whether poor performers are more likely to withdraw in the future, withdrawn employees are more likely to be poor performers in the future, and if these relationships hold even after controlling for prior withdraw or performance. These results will not only bridge two complementary, but currently separated, research streams, but also help practitioners better predict decreases in performance, increases in withdrawal, or both.

2. Theoretical development

For nearly a century, researchers have sought to better understand the key workplace outcome of job performance. Job performance is defined as the controllable employee behaviors that are expected to add value to the organization (Motowidlo, 2003; Rotundo & Sackett, 2002), including both task and contextual performance. Task performance reflects the core responsibilities directly responsible for producing the output valued by the organization whereas contextual performance represents discretionary behaviors that help support task performance or contribute to organizational goals (Borman & Motowidlo, 1997; Organ, Podsakoff, & Podsakoff, 2010). The attention employee job performance has received from researchers has resulted in a number of conclusions regarding what has frequently been considered the 'ultimate criterion' (Austin & Villanova, 1992; Thorndike, 1949). In reviewing this literature, one of the most consistent findings concerning job performance is the remarkable stability of performance over time. In fact, employee performance from a prior year has been shown to account for more than 70% of the total variance in the following year's performance (Sturman et al., 2005). Yet, even given that employee performance is relatively stable, there still exists a significant dynamic component that fluctuates over time. As such, systematic efforts have begun to search for factors that explain variations in performance over time (Sonnentag & Frese, 2012). This search has frequently coalesced around a set of employee characteristics that are expected to cause both short- and long-term changes in performance: employee withdrawal.

Employee withdrawal refers to a set of attitudes and behaviors that allow employees to avoid or circumvent elements of their jobs (Hanisch, 1995). Researchers have identified a number of different ways employees can physically or psychologically avoid working, including absenteeism, burnout, intentions to quit, job search, and tardiness (Bakker, Demerouti, & Verbeke, 2004; Blau, 1985, Bretz, Boudreau, & Judge, 1994; Hulin, 1991; Hulin, Roznowski, & Hachiya, 1985). Much like the construct of job performance discussed above, decades of research has shown that employee withdrawal develops in a systematic and predictable pattern with a high degree of consistency over time (Hom & Kinicki, 2001; Mobley, 1977). In fact, one study found that 70% of the variance of work withdrawal over an 18-month period was stable over time (Kammeyer-Mueller et al., 2005), the highest percentage of all fifteen variables studied. Yet, withdrawal researchers have outlined a number of intervening episodes, or 'shocks', that may curb, catalyze, or otherwise disrupt the stability and consistency of employee withdrawal (Lee & Mitchell, 1994). When investigating possible variables that may curtail or trigger employee withdrawal attitudes and behaviors, one variable is consistently believed to predict future withdrawal (e.g., Harrison, Virick, & William, 1996): job performance.

Thus, the theoretical landscape is such that withdrawal and performance are indelibly linked. Meta-analytic correlations between various forms of performance and withdrawal show a modest negative correlation between the two constructs exists and holds across all work settings (Swider & Zimmerman, 2010; Visweswaran, 2002; Zimmerman & Darnold, 2009). However, a review of the theoretical arguments put forth in primary studies offers an equivocal conclusion concerning the theoretical positioning of performance and withdrawal, as some scholars focus on how employee performance influences future withdrawal while others investigate how employee withdrawal influences future performance. Prior to testing for empirical support for both of these complementary perspectives, it is important to first understand the theoretical justification for each proposed ordering of employee performance and withdrawal.

2.1. Performance as an antecedent to withdrawal

Most, if not all, theories that posit employee performance as an antecedent of employee withdrawal can be broadly classified as turnover theories. While theories developed to explain employee withdrawal and subsequent turnover have an extensive