Job Embeddedness: The Importance of Links, Fit, and Sacrifice

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Introduction

Given that employee retention is of paramount importance to any organization, the concept of job embeddedness is worth investigating. Job embeddedness is a fairly new construct in organizational research that involves assessing and weighing the many dimensions of what influences people to stay in their jobs. Job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and job alternatives have all been studied at length, and have been relevant in the employee turnover literature. Job embeddedness seeks to go beyond these measures to determine what other factors predict voluntary job turnover. There is a growing amount of literature that points to non-work factors and other organization-focused predictors apart from job satisfaction as important influences of job turnover. These concepts and the research surrounding them spurred the development of job embeddedness as a new construct. This paper will begin with an introduction to the concept of job embeddedness, followed by a discussion of the relevance and applicability of job embeddedness as an organization tool. This will be supplemented by an overview of the contemporary empirical studies surrounding the topic. A discussion of the prevalence of job embeddedness as it relates to domestic and global voluntary job turnover will conclude this analysis of the topic. Job embeddedness is an important area of study in I/O psychology because it is one of the most effective ways of accounting for voluntary employee turnover.

Job embeddedness is an assemblage of psychological, social, and financial influences that determine employee retention (Mitchell, Holtom, Lee, Sablynsk, & Erez, 2001). The three facets that comprise job embeddedness are links, fit, and sacrifice. These three components are further divided into organization and community, depending on whether these influences occur on or off the job. Enmeshment in organization and in community are critical dimensions of job
embeddedness, and a person’s level of enmeshment is what the job embeddedness theory seeks to define. Links, fit, and sacrifice all have psychological, social, and financial implications and are manifest with employee turnover.

Links are formal or informal connections between a person, institutions, or other people (Mitchell et al., 2001). Employees, and often their families, are linked to organizations and their community. The web of links includes social, psychological, and financial connections. People are connected to work friends, non-work friends, their community, different groups, and the physical environment where they live and/or work. There are some links that are more important, depending on the person. Regardless, all links are part of the web that connects people to their organization and community. The greater number and strength of the links between an individual and the web they are a part of, the more the employee will feel bound to his/her job.

Fit refers to an employee’s perceived compatibility with the organization and surrounding community (Mitchell et al., 2001). It references how an employee perceives their compatibility or comfort with an organization and their environment. Personal values, knowledge, career aspirations, skills, and abilities should fit with company culture and job requirements. When organizational and personal qualities, needs, and demands are aligned, job embeddedness is much stronger. Enmeshment in the aforementioned web is significant when personal attributes are in accordance with the work environment. In addition to work, fit refers to an individual’s identity with their non-work community. This can involve factors like the political and religious climate, available entertainment options, and weather. Job embeddedness theory assumes that the better the fit between an individual, their organization, and their community, the stronger their ties will be to that organization. Professional and personal ties to an organization will make leaving a job much more difficult, and relocation costs will be significant (both literally and
Sacrifice is the perceived psychological, social, or material cost of leaving one’s organization and one’s community (Mitchell et al., 2001). Job-related losses include, but are not limited to, giving up fulfilling work projects, leaving familiar colleagues, and foregoing accrued and deserved benefits. Community-related losses could include giving up a short commute, having to leave close friends, and losing season tickets that took years to get. The more an employee has to give up when leaving a job, the less likely they will be to sever their relationship with an organization. While it may be possible to earn the same (or even a greater salary) in a new position, there are other benefits that have to be forgone like accrued vacation time and stock options. When people leave union membership jobs, they often begin at the bottom of the totem pole in their new position because unions value seniority and hierarchical structure. Leaving one organization for another requires people to sacrifice both personally and professionally. Job stability and advancement are two concepts we believe to be greatly beneficial, and they both are often nullified when leaving an organization.

Origins of Job Embeddedness

Job embeddedness was first termed by Granoveter in 1985 as a new concept for how well a person was socially enmeshed within their organization. Although the research on the idea of job embeddedness is still in its infancy, research into the areas in which job embeddedness can be a predictor of, like those mentioned above, has been for quite some time. March & Simon (1958) stated that voluntary employee turnover was a reflection of the level in which an employee decided to partake in activities within their organization (Le et al., 2004). This insight seemed to show that there was a distinction between the notion of participation and performance.
at work. However, to further develop the study of workplace commitment, Hulin (1991), Lee & Mitchell (2001) incorporated both participation and performance into an all-encompassing view of voluntary employee turnover and found that it’s not just one or the other, but more of an overall withdrawal (Lee et al., 2004).

The Relevance of Job Embeddedness Related to Voluntary Turnover

As the economic and social influences of voluntary turnover are continuing to plague the workplace, research on job embeddedness and its relation to turnover is becoming evermore relevant to researchers and organizations alike. The study of voluntary turnover focuses on the reasoning behind employees’ conscious decision to leave their jobs (Harman, Lee, Felps, Owens, 2007). Especially in the business world’s current state of fragility and uncertainty, an organization’s understanding of the determinants of its voluntary turnover is invaluable to its economic success and development. Job embeddedness theory is a more recent construct that builds upon multiple theories in voluntary turnover research history.

Two key theories that paved the way for job embeddedness include organizational commitment and job satisfaction. A brief explanation of these two constructs demonstrates the need for a deeper comprehensive understanding of voluntary turnover.

The organizational commitment construct measures the organizational issues in the workplace and includes an affective dimension, which assesses the degree to which employees feel an emotional attachment to their jobs. The dimension of “fit” in job embeddedness includes aspects of this attachment, however, it broadens the attachment to include those who may stay simply because they have found a personal niche based on their own talents and needs that is not associated with affect. Job embeddedness adds the concept of links and sacrifice to this
dimension of fit to account for less affective-based attachment to the workplace and broaden the study.

Job satisfaction is also commonly used to assess voluntary turnover in the workplace. The greatest addition job embeddedness adds to this construct is the measure of off-the-job satisfaction, which is ignored in this original construct. Job embeddedness’s measure of “links” includes both on and off-the-job satisfaction, which can either encourage turnover or deter an employee from leaving their job.

It is clear that the findings of both organizational commitment and job satisfaction were improved by the innovative expansion of job embeddedness. These two original constructs measure on-the-job dimensions very well, however their affective content may be limiting in deeper research. As research in voluntary turnover continues to develop, the newfound job embeddedness construct may be capable of notable improvements in both theory and practice.

The study of voluntary turnover itself has also benefitted from the influence of job embeddedness in research dialogue. The image theory and negative shock theory are well-known voluntary turnover theories that serve as the groundwork for job embeddedness to build upon. The image theory is a theoretical lens that looks at an employee’s incoming cognitive information and its influence on his/her existing psychological image of their current work values. Through the example of a new job offer, Harman, et al. (2007) claim that the first step in this image theory process is the comparison of new information with pre-existing value images of the existing work environment. Following this step, an employee will compare this new information with the “trajectory image,” or the goals he/she has set at the existing position. Finally, this new information is compared with the specific tactics that are effective in attaining these previous goals. If more than one of these comparisons results in favor of the new
information, as in the new job offer, the individual will undergo a conscious cost/benefit analysis to determine their future decisions (Harman, et. al., 2007). An organization’s understanding of how its links, fit, and sacrifice components measure up to its competitors is urgent and necessary in the modern workplace.

Because of the impact voluntary turnover has on an organization, every workplace is tasked with the development of an environment that adheres to the links, fit, and sacrifice that fosters a strong employee-workplace connection. Additionally, it is understood that job embeddedness may be helpful in the study of the impact of negative shocks in the workplace. Negative shocks are unpleasant events in the workplace that affect an employee (Burton, Holtom, Sablynski, Mitchell, Lee, 2010). Especially in the current tumultuous workforce, consciousness of these impending negative shocks is invaluable to an organization’s success. Negative shocks in the workplace may include the unpopular firing of a valued employee, a significant downsizing effort, or a reallocation of resources that has a negative effect on an employee.

The study by Burton, et al. (2010) finds that individuals who are highly embedded in their positions, when faced with negative shocks, instead of leaving, actually become more invested in their organization. It is clear that highly-embedded employees do not withdraw, but instead work harder to benefit the overall organization through an intentional improvement of their efforts and performance. Job embeddedness is understood to be a possible “buffering effect” in the face of negative shocks to a workplace, and, in fact, encourages a deeper integration into the organization.

**Current Research**
The general withdrawal found by Hulin (1991) and Lee & Mitchell (2001) most likely stemmed from additional research by Mitchell et al. (2001) into why people stay rather than leave. In the present study, Lee et al. (2004) seek to extend this notion of on- and off-the-job embeddedness to how it acted as a predictor for two criteria: the decision to perform (organizational citizenship and job performance), and the decision to participate (volitional absences and voluntary turnover) (2004) They did this by examining 1,650 participants spanning across five organizations. This research also attempts to examine the relationship between the concepts of performance and participation, which current studies have suggested interact more closely than previously thought. The authors came up with four hypotheses. The overarching theme between these four focused on examining effects of on- and off-the-job embeddedness on job performance, organizational citizenship, volitional absences and voluntary turnover.

Through data analysis, all hypotheses were supported so what this means is that on-the-job embeddedness is predictive of organizational citizenship and job performance. In contrast, off-the-job embeddedness was predictive of volitional absences and voluntary turnover. These results extend to the dimensions of links, fit and sacrifice in both the organization and community. An employee’s links, fit and sacrifice within the organization directly relate to organizational citizenship and job performance. Volitional absences and voluntary turnover are predicted by an employee’s links, fit and sacrifice within his or her community. Their results reiterate the need to measure retention of employees and job performance together, just like a person’s decision to participate and perform as mentioned earlier in previous studies.

There were some limitations to this study however. First, the researchers’ main tool in measuring on-and off-the-job variables were through the participants’ self-reports and evaluations from their superiors. This limits the support for establishing causal inferences due to
biases that may occur naturally between the five separate organizations used in the study. Second, on- and off-the job measures of embeddedness are relatively new and still needs extensive research. More insight into how a person manages their links, fit and sacrifice in respect to their work and home communities may be beneficial in establishing on- and off-the-job embeddedness as a predictor of the four domains previously mentioned. The area of job embeddedness has not yet adopted these measures as standard practice; even though the results align with previous studies. With research still relatively new, there is still no standardized way of measuring these dimensions. An agreed upon measure would greatly influence subsequent research and lead to more generalizable findings. Last, grouping measures into on- and off-the job may limit understanding. Future research should look to measure the six dimensions of job embeddedness individually to better make predictions. More specifically, research should examine how links, fit and sacrifice moderate effects on organizational citizenship, job performance, volitional absences and voluntary turnover.

A Cross-Cultural Expansion of Job Embeddedness

While the job embeddedness construct and its research has been a critical addition to turnover research, most empirical work has been conducted for and with a domestic audience. The majority of the research on job embeddedness has not been conducted on a cross-cultural level. Many corporations today are globally run, having branches and employees in multiple countries. The findings of job embeddedness need to reflect this condition. This research is very important to the findings of employee turnover, because reasons for employee turnover may differ from culture to culture. Anuradha Ramesh and Michele Gelfand (2010) researched the role of job embeddedness in the prediction of employee turnover in both individualistic and
Collectivistic cultures. This was the first research branch of research of its kind, taking data from a western individualistic country like the United States, compared to data taken from a non-western, collectivistic country like India.

Ramesh and Gelfand also constructed a meta-analytical model with the use of recent research studies by Mitchell and Lee (2001). “Job embeddedness suggests that there are numerous stands that connect an employee and his or her family in a social, psychological, and financial web that includes work and non-work friends, groups, the community, and the physical environment in which he or she lives” (Mitchell and Lee p. 1104). These domains were then divided into six aspects of job embeddedness: organizational fit, community fit, organizational links, community links, organizational sacrifice and community sacrifice. These divisions of job embeddedness help in the prediction of employee turnover as well as organizational commitment, and job satisfaction. However, these different divisions of job embeddedness might change results in different cultures. Culture is defined as being both objective and subjective, and including “a group's characteristic way of viewing the environment.” (Triandis, 2006 p.3). The fact that culture can impact a work environment is extremely important when researching the prediction of employee turnover when determining the drivers of voluntary turnover with regards to job embeddedness.

Individualistic countries typically contain more of an emphasis on independence, individual autonomy, and personal advancement, while collectivistic cultures place more of an emphasis on dependency, personal relationships, and intimate interactions. They key differences in cross culture shows great significance between reasons of employee turnover and job satisfaction. Another factor that Ramesh and Gelfand (2010) decided was extremely important to this study was “family embeddedness”. Family embeddedness was how the element of the
family can affect the turnover and the satisfaction of a job. This notion of family embeddedness is crucial because it is the first study of its time to integrate the family domain into job embeddedness. Ramesh and Gelfand hoped to answer whether job embeddedness was applicable in collectivistic countries such as India. Ramesh and Gelfand also wanted to gain knowledge if employee turnover stems from similar or different domains of job embeddedness in both collectivistic and individualistic countries.

Ramesh and Gelfand composed this study in 2006 in using domestic and India-based call center employees. These employees were given an online survey, administered by the company via email or letter. Turnover data was then obtained from the company 6 months after completing the survey. There results were very positive and negative with regards to their hypotheses. Some, but not all of their original hypotheses were supported but overall shed new information regarding job embeddedness in correlation to employee turnover and cultural differences. Their results indicated that job fit would be the key indicator of employee turnover in individualistic countries due to focus on autonomy and self-advancement. In collectivistic countries such as India, community links is the biggest factor in predicting turnover as they value their relationships on a much higher level. However, both collectivistic and individualistic countries value the new theory of family embeddedness. The role of the family impacts both types of cultures very directly. Just as the United States economy expanded vastly over the years, India’s economy is now beginning to grow very quickly as well. However, even though India is a growing, collectivistic country, their deeply set ‘morals’ have not changed with in their society; allowing the researches to interpret the results to impact other collectivistic countries in the same manner. The study of employee turnover is one of the most discussed and researched topics in industrial organization psychology. This study aimed to help apply employee turnover
theories to become more tailored to specific cultures and more relevant to the modern industrial world.

**Conclusion**

As the current research dictates, job embeddedness is a critical concept that warrants the attention of many organizations in the workplace. Increased attention to links, fit, and sacrifice has the potential to decrease voluntary turnover in the workplace and encourage organizations to implement practices that promote job embeddedness.

In an era of economic uncertainty and the growing need for employee participation and performance in the workforce, the role of job embeddedness has become crucial to the development and ongoing success of every business sector. It becomes clear that the ongoing issue of voluntary turnover is also dramatically influencing organizations around the country and abroad, therefore, the increased attention to job embeddedness will hopefully both salvage and improve an employee’s connection to his or her work environment.
References


