

Turnover Tug-of-War: A Standoff Between Job Satisfaction and Tenure

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Abstract

Human resource managers often seek to identify the factors that drive employees' intentions to leave or remain with an organization, with job satisfaction and tenure being prominent considerations. This study synthesizes statistical research on how tenure and job satisfaction influence an employee's likelihood of resigning. In this article, previous empirical studies that have explored job satisfaction and tenure as predictors of turnover intentions been reviewed and summarized. Prior to conducting the analysis, it was hypothesized that tenure would serve as a stronger predictor of turnover intentions. However, the findings of this study reveal that job satisfaction is a significantly more robust predictor of turnover intentions than tenure. These results provide valuable insights for human resource managers, offering guidance on strategies to reduce turnover intentions and understanding the broader organizational impact of such reductions. The article concludes with practical implications of these findings and provides recommendations for human resource management practices.

Keywords: human resources, turnover, job satisfaction, tenure

1. Introduction

Human resource managers across all industries are continually under pressure to minimize voluntary employee turnover. A critical strategy for mitigating voluntary turnover is to identify the underlying factors that lead employees to leave. However, the ability to fully explain the individual decision-making process regarding voluntary turnover remains somewhat limited. While dissatisfaction and the availability of alternative opportunities may prompt employees to resign, such factors do not consistently lead to turnover (Allen, Moffitt, & Meeks, 2005). Employee turnover can be costly for organizations, making it crucial for human resource managers to understand the specific factors driving voluntary departures. Research has demonstrated that the intention to quit is the most immediate predictor of actual

turnover, reflecting an individual's motivation to remain or leave (Werbel & Bedeian, 1989). Consequently, understanding the causes of employees' intentions to stay or leave is of paramount importance. This research specifically examines the relationship between job satisfaction and turnover intentions, as well as tenure and turnover intentions.

Initially, the relationship between job satisfaction and turnover intentions is examined. Job satisfaction refers to the degree to which organizational members (employees) experience a positive affective orientation toward their membership within the organization. Employees with a positive affective orientation are considered satisfied, whereas those with a negative affective orientation are deemed dissatisfied. Higher levels of job satisfaction are generally associated with lower levels of intent to leave an organization (Martin, 1979). The negative relationship between job satisfaction and turnover has been consistently demonstrated in the literature (Arnold & Feldman, 1982).

Job satisfaction is widely regarded as a multidimensional construct, encompassing both intrinsic and extrinsic aspects of the job. The degree of employee satisfaction reflects the extent to which worker expectations are met. Employees expect their jobs to provide a combination of factors, such as pay, promotion opportunities, and autonomy, each of which holds varying degrees of importance for different individuals. When employees' expectations remain unmet to a significant degree, job satisfaction diminishes, leading to heightened turnover intentions (Egan, Yang, & Bartlett, 2004).

Overall job satisfaction comprises several components, including satisfaction with pay, supervisors, co-workers, and the nature of the work itself. Human resource managers must understand these individual components to influence employees' overall satisfaction and, consequently, predict turnover intentions. Employees tend to exhibit higher levels of job satisfaction, and therefore lower turnover intentions, when the characteristics of their work environment align with their needs (Bright, 2008).

What, then, are the advantages of using job satisfaction to predict employees' turnover intentions? Due to the various components that contribute to overall job satisfaction, human resource managers have multiple avenues through which to influence employees' satisfaction levels, thereby reducing turnover intentions. Both job satisfaction and turnover intentions reflect employees' perceptions of their employment, shaped by the degree to which their salient needs are fulfilled in the workplace (Bright, 2008). Depending on the organization, human resource managers may possess some degree of influence over employees' overall satisfaction levels.

Are there limitations to using job satisfaction as a predictor of employees' turnover intentions? While the multiple components of job satisfaction provide advantages for human resource managers, they also present challenges. Specifically, identifying the "deal breaker" element for each employee, given the diverse aspects that constitute overall job satisfaction, can be complex. Furthermore, because job satisfaction reflects an individual's attitude toward their employment, it varies significantly across employees. Another potential drawback is the

possibility that other variables may more accurately predict turnover intentions and, ultimately, turnover behavior.

Next, the relationship between tenure and turnover intentions will be explored. Tenure primarily represents the relationship between an individual and the organization. Previous research has demonstrated a negative correlation between tenure and turnover, suggesting that longer tenure is associated with a lower likelihood of leaving an organization. This relationship offers important insights into the turnover process, particularly if tenure correlates with other turnover-related factors. When tenure is included in a regression model predicting turnover, it introduces variability based on whether an employee is new to their role (Mitchel, 1981).

There are both advantages and disadvantages to using tenure as a predictor of turnover intentions. On the positive side, employees with longer tenure may not have had the desire or opportunity to change jobs (Van Breukelen, Van Der Vlist, & Steensma, 2004). It is logical to assume that employees with extensive tenure would be less inclined to leave, as they often receive benefits such as higher pay, additional vacation time, improved stock options, and better retirement benefits, which can reduce turnover intentions.

However, there are also disadvantages to using tenure to predict turnover intentions. Prolonged tenure may increase the risk of burnout and exhaustion (Bright, 2008). Over time, long-tenured employees may become stagnant or complacent, leading to decreased performance. In these cases, turnover may not necessarily be detrimental. While the costs associated with replacing a long-tenured employee are evident, replacing a manager—particularly one who is only marginally effective—may bring benefits that outweigh the costs (Mitchel, 1981).

Having discussed job satisfaction and tenure individually, it is important to compare and contrast their roles as predictors of turnover intentions. Exploration of the similarities between these two predictors, followed by an examination of how they differ in their ability to predict turnover intentions was conducted.

What similarities, if any, do job satisfaction and tenure share in predicting turnover intentions? Both job satisfaction and tenure are negatively correlated with turnover intentions, meaning that as either variable increases, employees are less likely to leave the organization. High levels of job satisfaction and extended tenure are both generally viewed as desirable by employees. Additionally, tenure may influence an employee's level of job satisfaction, which, in turn, affects turnover intentions.

However, there are several key differences between job satisfaction and tenure as predictors of turnover intentions. Job satisfaction is a multifaceted construct, encompassing various components such as pay satisfaction, supervisor and co-worker satisfaction, and satisfaction with the work itself. This complexity makes it more difficult to pinpoint which specific aspect of satisfaction is influencing turnover intentions. Furthermore, job satisfaction is not easily observable and is often subject to personal interpretation. According to Allen et al. (2005),

there are four personality traits—locus of control, risk aversion, self-monitoring, and proactive personality—that influence how individuals make decisions about their job satisfaction. These traits help explain the dynamics of each person’s job satisfaction, providing a more nuanced understanding of turnover intentions. Lastly, while human resource managers can influence job satisfaction, they have limited ability to directly impact tenure.

In summary, while both job satisfaction and tenure are important predictors of turnover intentions, they differ significantly in their complexity, the factors influencing them, and the degree to which they can be influenced by management.

2. Method

2.1 Job Satisfaction

To determine the average correlation between job satisfaction and turnover intentions, ten empirical studies that investigated the relationship between these two variables were reviewed. Job satisfaction, as the first predictor, was assessed using several measures, including job satisfaction, overall satisfaction, and a composite of pay satisfaction, promotion satisfaction, co-worker satisfaction, and supervisor satisfaction, categorized individually within the broader job satisfaction framework. Turnover intentions were redefined using parameters such as intent to quit, withdrawal cognition, and turnover intentions.

The scope of this research was specifically limited to employee job satisfaction and turnover intentions. For job satisfaction, any data that solely focused on pay satisfaction, supervisor satisfaction, or co-worker satisfaction as the primary variables were excluded. Regarding turnover intentions, the analysis was restricted to individual turnover intentions and excluded studies that measured actual turnover or turnover behavior.

Within the sample set, four studies contained extremely large sample sizes ($n > 960$) compared to the others. To assess the impact of these "outlier" samples, an analysis was conducted by removing the three largest samples. Excluding these large samples reduced statistical significance, leading to the decision to include them in the final analysis.

Table 1. Sample references for job satisfaction variable

Article Referenced	Sample Size (N)	r(obs)
Allen, et al., 2005	279	-0.41
Spector, et al., 2007	1425	-0.60
Spector, et al., 2007	1295	-0.41
Michaels & Spector, 1982	112	-0.68
Arnold & Feldman, 1982	1058	-0.30
Chen, et al., 1998	205	-0.16
Van Breukelen, et al., 2004	202	-0.31
Andrews & Dziegielewski, 2005	960	-0.35
Trimble, 2006	176	-0.55
Abate, et al., 2018	101	-0.24

2.2 Tenure

To assess the correlation between tenure and turnover intentions, ten empirical studies that explored the relationship between these two variables were reviewed. The second predictor in this study, tenure, was measured using the variables of tenure and length of service. Turnover intentions were redefined using parameters such as intent to quit, withdrawal cognition, and turnover intentions.

One of the samples in the analysis had an exceptionally large sample size ($n = 1058$) compared to the other studies. To assess the influence of this outlier sample, an analysis was performed with the data set excluding it. This exclusion resulted in a broader range of confidence intervals, leading to retention of this sample in the final analysis. The scope of this research was confined to employee tenure and individual turnover intentions with data related to union tenure or actual turnover behavior being excluded.

Table 2. Sample references for tenure variable

Article Referenced	Sample Size (N)	r(obs)
Michaels & Spector, 1982	112	-0.10
Arnold & Feldman, 1982	1058	-0.13
Karatepe & Karatepe, 2009	263	-0.05
Mitchel, 1981	274	-0.02
Paré & Tremblay, 2007	394	-0.24
Maden, 2014	258	-0.11
Chen, et al., 1998	205	-0.07
Van Breuklelen, et al., 2004	202	-0.26
Trimble, 2006	176	-0.04
Abate, et al., 2018	101	-0.12

Upon completion of data compilation, the information was entered into the Hunter/Schmidt meta-analysis spreadsheet to calculate the mean correlation among job satisfaction, tenure, and turnover intentions. Sample sizes and corresponding correlation coefficients were extracted from each of the twenty referenced studies (see Table 1 and Table 2) and systematically input into the database. This process facilitated the computation of the average correlation, providing a comprehensive assessment of the overall relationship between job satisfaction, tenure, and turnover intentions.

3. Results

The findings of this study indicate a relatively modest correlation between tenure and turnover intentions ($r = -0.126$), in contrast to a substantially stronger correlation between job satisfaction and turnover intentions ($r = -0.421$). Descriptive statistics for each predictor are presented in Table 3.

First, the correlation between job satisfaction and turnover intentions is moderately strong ($r = -0.421$), supporting the theory that higher levels of job satisfaction are associated with a decreased likelihood of turnover. Job satisfaction was found to be influenced by several situational factors, which contributed to the relationship between job satisfaction and turnover intentions. However, since overall job satisfaction was used as the variable in this analysis, it remains unclear which specific facet of job satisfaction most effectively predicts turnover intentions in any given context (Motowidlo, 1983).

The individual correlations used to calculate the average correlation between job satisfaction and turnover intentions exhibited varying degrees of strength, ranging from $r = -0.16$ to $r = -0.68$, with most correlations falling between $r = -0.36$ and $r = -0.55$.

In contrast, a significantly weaker correlation ($r = -0.126$) was found between tenure and turnover intentions. Notably, the relationship between tenure and turnover intentions was most pronounced among public employees. In this group, longer tenure was associated with a greater likelihood of burnout and exhaustion, which in turn increased turnover intentions (Bright, 2008). This was the only context in which a positive relationship between tenure and turnover intentions was observed ($r = 0.55$).

The individual correlation coefficients utilized to calculate the average correlation between tenure and turnover intentions ranged from $r = -0.02$ to $r = -0.31$, with the majority of values falling within the range of $r = -0.04$ to $r = -0.14$.

Table 3. Descriptive Statistics

Hypothesis Frame	<i>k</i>	N	Mean <i>r</i>	95% Conf LO	95% Conf HI	<i>Q_b</i>	<i>Q_{b p}</i>
All samples	20	8,856	-.315	-.394	-.236		
Tenure v Job Satisfaction						177.24	0.000
Tenure	10	3,043	-.126	-.179	-.079		
Job Satisfaction	10	5,813	-.419	-.500	-.338		

Note. K: number of samples; N: number of observations; mean r : sample size-weighted correlation; CONF: confidence interval for r ; Q_b : χ^2 based test for significance of moderation.

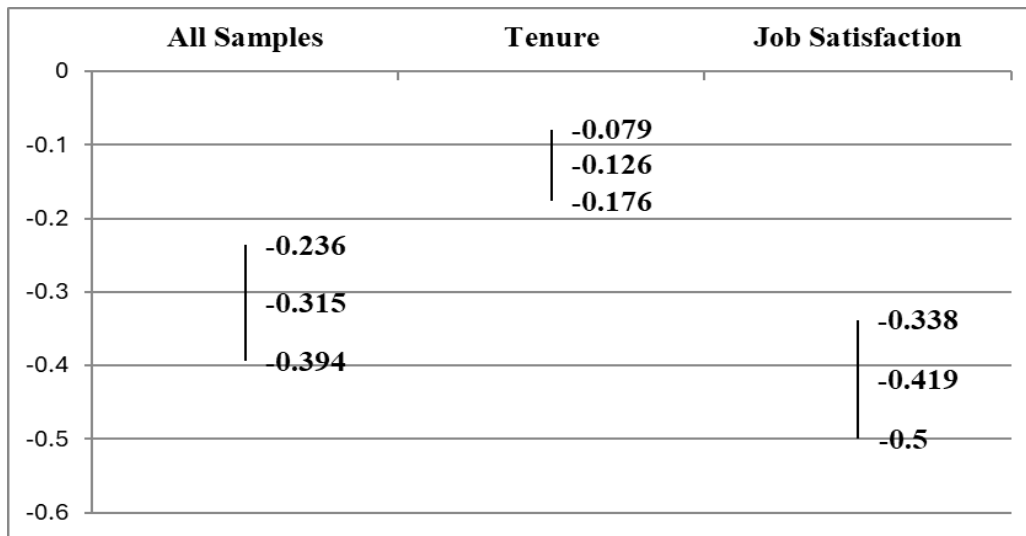


Figure 1. Range of correlations for all samples, including job satisfaction and tenure individually

4. Discussion

Based on the findings of this study, it is recommended that human resource managers cultivate a thorough understanding of the interrelationships among job satisfaction, tenure, and turnover intentions. Specifically, when seeking to predict the factors contributing to voluntary turnover, human resource managers should place greater emphasis on the relationship between job satisfaction and turnover intentions.

To mitigate turnover, human resource managers should focus on strategies to enhance employee job satisfaction. One approach involves addressing potential issues of underemployment. Employees experiencing underemployment may feel disillusioned, frustrated by a lack of career advancement opportunities, and unfulfilled due to the underutilization of their skills (Maynard, Joseph, & Maynard, 2006). By recognizing the negative impact of underemployment, human resource managers can design programs—such as "manager-in-training" initiatives—that ensure employees' skills are fully utilized and offer clear career development paths, ultimately reducing turnover intentions.

Furthermore, it is recommended that human resource managers recognize that not all turnover is detrimental. Organizations that experience turnover predominantly from lower-performing employees may have less reason for concern compared to those that lose higher-performing staff. The significance of turnover largely depends on the effectiveness of those who remain, in comparison to those who leave. In fact, turnover among lower performers can provide opportunities to hire individuals with more suitable skills for the organization's future growth, fostering innovation and potentially enhancing employee morale by creating opportunities for internal advancement (Werbel & Bedeian, 1989).

Additionally, human resource managers should invest in high-involvement human resource

practices to bolster employee retention. These practices, which indicate to employees that their contributions are valued, and their well-being is prioritized, can effectively reduce turnover intentions. Several practices have been shown to positively impact retention, including empowerment, which allows employees to assume greater responsibility and enjoy task autonomy; competence development through job rotation programs, mentoring, and training; information-sharing practices that strengthen organizational trust and engagement; recognition practices that acknowledge employees' contributions; and fair reward systems that ensure equity in compensation, performance evaluations, and job assignments (Paré & Tremblay, 2007).

While much of the focus has been on enhancing job satisfaction, human resource managers should also consider the impact of increasing tenure on organizational outcomes. Given demographic trends, such as the aging workforce in the United States, it is crucial for human resource managers to anticipate differences in turnover patterns between older and younger employees (Werbel & Bedeian, 1989). Human resource planning should include strategies for managing these demographic shifts to maintain a competitive workforce.

The success of these recommendations will vary across organizations, with both potential advantages and disadvantages.

Advantages: One significant advantage is that the implementation of these recommendations is relatively low-cost and can be quickly put into practice. Additionally, these strategies are likely to help organizations retain skilled and effective employees, as well as those with high potential for growth.

Disadvantages: One potential drawback is the impact of turnover among high-performing employees. While new hires can replace departing employees, their competencies may be lower due to lack of experience and accumulated organizational knowledge. This suggests that turnover, particularly among high performers, can be costly, both in terms of direct replacement and the loss of valuable organizational insights. Moreover, factors such as increased competition, client demands, and training costs are compelling organizations to reconsider the issue of turnover (Huang, Lawler, & Lei, 2007). Furthermore, the implementation of these recommendations depends on the cooperation of employees and supervisors; any lack of cooperation could hinder their effectiveness.

Predicting turnover intentions is a valuable tool, as it is closely linked to actual turnover behavior (Shore & Martin, 1989). As discussed, turnover is a complex decision that involves financial, transactional, and psychological costs for both employees and employers. By comprehensively understanding the factors that drive turnover intentions, human resource managers can mitigate the expenses associated with voluntary turnover, particularly by reducing training and recruitment costs. Predicting turnover intentions provides a competitive advantage, enabling managers to proactively address potential turnover before it becomes a costly issue for the organization.

5. Conclusion

Human resource managers' roles are evolving, and it is essential for the success of any organization to reduce voluntary turnover while also recognizing that some turnover can be beneficial. By understanding the dynamics between job satisfaction, tenure, and turnover intentions, human resource managers can implement high-involvement practices that create a positive work climate, thereby lowering turnover rates and minimizing the associated costs of recruitment and training. Moreover, with this understanding, human resource managers can foster longer employee tenure, which in turn reduces turnover intentions.

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Data sharing statement

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