

Trapped with nowhere to go: Understanding the lived experience of reluctant stayers

Dr Russell Wordsworth, *University of Canterbury Business School*
Dr Monica Kirsten; Dr Melissa Du Plessis, *School of Management Sciences, University of South Africa*

Background and problem

The extensive body of literature on voluntary turnover has long focused on understanding why employees choose to leave their jobs on their own accord. This area of study has evolved over time, producing a multitude of explanations for this phenomenon (Hom, Lee, Shaw & Hausknecht, 2017). Early theories simply linked turnover to job dissatisfaction and the attractiveness of external opportunities (March & Simon, 1958), while contemporary research has introduced more intricate frameworks. Generally, turnover is viewed as detrimental to organisational performance due to its associated costs and negative effects on productivity and morale (Allen, Bryant, & Vardaman, 2010; Hancock, Allen, Bosco, McDaniel, & Pearce, 2013; Ton & Huckman, 2008). Consequently, retaining employees has become a managerial priority (Jiang, Lepak, Hu, & Baer, 2012; Tessema, Tesfom, Faircloth, Tesfagiorgis, & Teckle, 2023).

More recent research demonstrates that employee retention is, however, not always the result of job satisfaction and organisational commitment, and that some employees stay with an organisation despite holding a strong preference to leave. For example, Hom, Mitchell, Lee, and Griffeth's (2012) proximal withdrawal states and destinations (PWSD) model conceptualises four distinct withdrawal states, including 'reluctant stayers'; while in the related careers literature Stengård et al. (2017) refer to 'locked in' employees. While limited research has explored the antecedents and consequences of reluctant staying, certain studies have found that traditional predictors of turnover, such as job satisfaction and organisational commitment, do not effectively apply to reluctant stayers (Li, Lee, Mitchell, Hom, and Griffeth, 2016). Other research by Boswell, Gardner, and Wang (2017) indicates that job satisfaction and commitment decline among reluctant stayers, while neglect and reduced job performance increase after unsuccessful job searches. Additionally, Stengård, Bernhard-Oettel, Berntson, and Leineweber (2017) reveal that being 'locked in' leads to helplessness, compromised health, and increased absenteeism.

Despite being undesirable for both individuals and organisations, no study has extensively investigated the lived experience of reluctant stayers or the strategies they employ to cope with their situation.

Objectives

This study aims to comprehend the coping mechanisms that reluctant stayers employ to alleviate negative emotions, reduce perceived helplessness, and foster a sense of meaning in their work. Using qualitative techniques, the research seeks to uncover how reluctant stayers respond to feeling 'locked in', and how they navigate their circumstances to enhance well-being and maintain a sense of purpose in their jobs.

Trapped with nowhere to go: Understanding the lived experience of reluctant stayers

Methods

The research population consists of all 1783 academic staff at a large public university in South Africa. The study comprises a two-stage mixed methods research design. Study 1 involved an online survey ($n = 112$) to collect data on participants' preference for leaving or staying and perceived control, turnover intentions, job search behaviour and other attitudinal variables. Although not the primary focus of the research, Study 1 was necessary to categorise participants into one of the four withdrawal states identified by the PWSD model enabling the identification of reluctant stayers that would be invited to participate in Study 2 (all participants had to indicate if they were willing to participate in a follow-up interview and if so then requested to provide their contact details). Using the PWSD model and Brasher's (2016) measures of leaving preference and control, participants were categorised as follows: reluctant stayers ($n = 43$), enthusiastic stayers ($n = 27$), reluctant leavers ($n = 15$) and enthusiastic leavers ($n = 27$). Currently underway, Study 2 involves in-depth interviews with approximately 30 reluctant stayers and a smaller subset of enthusiastic stayers, facilitating state comparisons. Results from Study 2 will be available for presentation at the upcoming HRIC conference.

Results

Results from Study 1 support Li et al.'s (2016) finding that reluctant stayers and enthusiastic leavers exhibit low levels of affective and normative commitment, job satisfaction and engagement when compared to enthusiastic stayers or reluctant leavers. Reluctant stayers and enthusiastic leavers were also found to have significantly higher levels of turnover intention and job search behaviour than enthusiastic stayers and reluctant leavers. Intriguingly, unlike Li et al.'s (2016) results, continuance commitment and the sacrifice facet of job embeddedness do not significantly differ across the four proximal withdrawal states. Industry context could possibly explain the relatively high level of continuance commitment reported across all four groups of participants. University academics were specifically selected as the research population as we posit that reluctant staying may be common in the profession due to high switching costs, low transferability of knowledge and skills and limited opportunities for job switching without also having to consider moving to a new city, region or country. Further qualitative investigation is thus warranted to comprehensively understand the circumstances leading to reluctant stayers' perceived lack of control over their decision to leave.

Conclusions

Our study, once complete, will have important theoretical and managerial implications. Explicating lived experience of reluctant stayers will broaden our understanding of this specific proximal withdrawal state, and directly responds to Li et al.'s (2016) call for more person-centred approaches to investigate the different proximal withdrawal states which precede voluntary turnover. We also anticipate that the research will make meaningful theoretical contributions to literature on career development and individual well-being by explicating how employees respond to 'locked in' situations. From a practical perspective, this research may potentially identify strategies that HR managers and supervisors can use to identify and support reluctant stayers and most importantly help employees reframe their state of reluctant staying to one of enthusiastic staying.

Trapped with nowhere to go: Understanding the lived experience of reluctant stayers

References

- Allen, D., Bryant, P. & Vardaman, J. M. 2010. Retaining Talent: Replacing Misconceptions with Evidence-based Strategies. *Academy of Management Perspectives*, 24(2): 48-64. <https://doi.org/10.5465/amp.24.2.48>
- Boswell, W. R., Gardner, R. G., & Wang, J. 2017. Is retention necessarily a win? Outcomes of searching and staying. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 98, 163-172. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jvb.2016.11.006>
- Brasher, E. E. 2016. *You Can't Always Get What You Want: Developing and Validating Measures of Leaving Preference and Perceived Control*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Ohio University, Ohio. Retrieved from https://etd.ohiolink.edu/apexprod/rws_olink/r/1501/10?p10_etd_subid=114811&clear=10
- Hancock, J. I., Allen, D. G., Bosco, F. A., McDaniel, K. R., & Pierce, C. A. 2013. Meta-analytic review of employee turnover as a predictor of firm performance. *Journal of Management*, 39: 573–603. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0149206311424943>
- Hom, P. W., Lee, T. W., Shaw, J. D., & Hausknecht, J. P. (2017). One hundred years of employee turnover theory and research. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 102(3): 530-454. <https://psycnet.apa.org/doi/10.1037/apl0000103>
- Hom, P. W., Mitchell, T. R., Lee, T. W., & Griffeth, R. W. 2012. Reviewing employee turnover: Focusing on proximal withdrawal states and an expanded criterion. *Psychological Bulletin*, 138(5): 831–858. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0027983>
- Jiang, K., Lepak, D. P., Hu, J., & Baer, J. C. 2012. How does human resource management influence organizational outcomes? A meta-analytic investigation of mediating mechanisms. *Academy of Management Journal*, 55(6): 1264-1294. <https://doi.org/10.5465/amj.2011.0088>
- Li, J. (J.), Lee, T. W., Mitchell, T. R., Hom, P. W., & Griffeth, R. W. 2016. The effects of proximal withdrawal states on job attitudes, job searching, intent to leave, and employee turnover. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 101(10): 1436-1456. <https://doi.org/10.1037/apl0000147>
- March, J. C. & Simon, H. A. 1958. *Organizations*. New York: Wiley.
- Stengård, J., Bernhard-Oettel, C., Berntson, E., & Leineweber, C. 2017. Stuck in the job: Does helplessness precede being locked-in at the workplace or vice versa? An analysis of cross-lagged effects. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 102: 15–27. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jvb.2017.06.001>
- Tesseman, M. T., Tesfom, G., Faircloth, M. A., Tesfagiorgis, M., & Techle, P. 2023. The “Great Resignation”: Causes, Consequences, and Creative HR Management Strategies. *Journal of Human Resource and Sustainability Studies*, 10(1). <https://doi.org/10.4236/jhrss.2022.101011>

Trapped with nowhere to go: Understanding the lived experience of reluctant stayers

Ton, Z., & Huckman, R. S. 2008. Managing the impact of employee turnover on performance: The role of process conformance. *Organization Science*, 19(1): 56–68. <https://doi.org/10.1287/orsc.1070.0294>

Trapped with nowhere to go: Understanding the lived experience of reluctant stayers