Reasons for Women to Leave the IT Workforce

Peter Hoonakker
University of Wisconsin-Madison, USA

Pascale Carayon
University of Wisconsin-Madison, USA

Jen Schoepke
University of Wisconsin-Madison, USA

INTRODUCTION

Turnover has been a major issue among information technology (IT) personnel since the very early days of computing as well as nowadays (Moore, 2000; Niederman & Summer, 2003). IT personnel have a strong tendency to frequently switch employers. Annual turnover in the information systems (IS) field ranged between 15% and 20% during the 1960s and the early 1970s. In the late 1970s, the turnover was as high as 28% annually and around 20% in the early 1980s. By the 1990s, the turnover rate reached 25 to 33% annually (Jiang & Klein, 2002). Many large American companies had a 25 to 33% turnover rate among their IS personnel in the late 1990s (Hayes, 1998). Although *women* represent an increasingly important segment of the labor force, their turnover rate can exceed 2½ times the turnover rate of men (Chusmir, 1982; Cotton & Tuttle, 1986; Davis & Kuhn, 2003; Giacobbe Miller & Wheeler, 1992; Schwarz, 1989). A meta-analysis by Cotton & Tuttle (1986) of 120 datasets showed strong evidence for gender differences in turnover: women are more likely to leave their job than men. Gender differences in turnover are less consistent among nonmanagerial and nonprofessional employees, and are stronger among professional (Cotton & Tuttle, 1986). However, recent evidence suggests that educated women start resembling men with regard to turnover rate and pattern (Griffeth, Hom, & Gaertner, 2000; Royalty, 1998). Educated women are more likely to leave to take on another job, while less educated women are more likely to abandon the labor force (Royalty, 1998). Furthermore, part of the higher turnover rates for women can be explained by individual variables that turnover studies conducted by economists and focused on industry do not consider, such as age, tenure, marital status, occupation and salary (Giacobbe Miller & Wheeler, 1992). In this chapter, we look at gender differences in reasons why IT personnel want to leave their job, and in their intentions once they have left their job.

BACKGROUND

Age, tenure, and number of dependents are negatively related to intention to leave one's organization (Cotton & Tuttle, 1986; Griffith et al., 2000). Married employees are less likely to quit than unmarried persons (Cotton & Tuttle, 1986). The effect of education on turnover is ambiguous. Results from meta-analysis show education to be positively related to turnover (Cotton & Tuttle, 1986). However, some studies have found a negative relationship between education and turnover (Cotton & Tuttle, 1986; Porter, Steers, Mowday, & Boulian, 1974). Salary is negatively related to turnover (Cotton & Tuttle, 1986). We also know that demographic variables have direct effects on work-related attitudes such as job satisfaction (Compton, 1987; Igbaria & Greenhaus, 1992). Age and organizational tenure are positively related to satisfaction and involvement (Cotton & Tuttle, 1986; Igbaria & Greenhaus, 1992). Education has been found to be negatively related to satisfaction (Igbaria & Greenhaus, 1992; Parasuraman, 1982), and organizational involvement (Mottaz, 1988). Demographic variables have direct effects on turnover intention beyond their effects on turnover intention through satisfaction

and involvement (Igbaria & Greenhaus, 1992; Parasuraman, 1982).

An important question rarely addressed in the literature is: where do women go after they leave their job? In a study on gender differences in turnover intention, Giacobbe Miller and Wheeler (1992) found that turnover intention among women was twice as high as men in comparable occupations. However, after controlling for age and job dissatisfaction, the gender effect disappeared. The researchers also found that meaningfulness of work was a strong predictor of intention to leave for women. We found similar results in a study on gender differences in job and organizational factors as predictors of quality of working life (Hoonakker, Marian, & Carayon, 2004b). For female employees in the IT department of a large public organization, task identity was one of the most important factors explaining gender differences in quality of working life (job strain, job commitment, and job satisfaction). A study by Allen, Drevs, and Ruhe (1999) looked at reasons why college-educated women change employment. The top three reasons were promotion, better pay/opportunities, and relocation (marriage/family). When asked what the employer could have done to make the respondents stay in their position of employment, the three most important suggestions were: to provide more pay or recognition (25%), to change working conditions (19%) and to move to another position (16%). The study by Giacobbe Miller and Wheeler (1992) showed that for both men and women, promotional opportunities predict intention to leave. In our study, we found similar levels of turnover intention among women and men (Hoonakker, Carayon, Schoepke, & Marian, 2004a; Schoepke, Hoonakker, & Carayon, 2004). Female IT employees perceived job and organizational characteristics and quality of working life in a manner similar to men. There were no gender differences in job satisfaction, organizational involvement, tension, fatigue and burnout. However, we found important differences in the factors that predict turnover (i.e., pathways to turnover) (Hoonakker et al., 2004a). For men, three pathways played an important role in predicting turnover: (1) the pathway from IT demands to emotional exhaustion to turnover (partly mediated by job satisfaction); (2) the pathway from challenge, career opportunities and rewards to job satisfaction to turnover; and (3) the pathway be-

tween rewards and turnover intention (also partly mediated by job satisfaction). Supervisory support did not play a significant role for men, but played a significant role in turnover of female IT employees. Supervisory support is related to nearly all the job and organizational characteristics, has a direct effect on turnover intention, as well in the pathways that are mediated through emotional exhaustion and job satisfaction. Job satisfaction also plays a central role for women: it is highly related to turnover intention, and many of the pathways to turnover intention are mediated by job satisfaction (Hoonakker et al., 2004a).

MAIN THRUST OF THE ARTICLE

Methods

We used a Web-based survey to collect the data (see Barrios (2003) for a detailed description of the Web based survey management system). A total of five IT organizations participated in the study: one large organization (N>500), one medium sized company (N=200) and three small companies (N<100). A total of 624 respondents responded to the survey (56% response rate). Twenty-seven cases in the sample had missing data on gender and were not used in the analysis. For the analysis reported in this chapter, we used data of 324 male employees (54%) and 273 female employees (46%). Respondents vary in age from 20 to 68 years (mean=39.7 years). The majority of the sample is married (61%); 9% is living with a partner; 1% is separated; 6% is divorced, 1% is widowed and 9% is single. Fifty-six percent of the respondents have children; 83% of the respondents who have children have children that still live at home. Forty-three percent of the respondents have one or more children younger than 7 years. Ten percent of the women and 2% of the men have a part-time job. Fifty percent of the men and 38% of the women telecommute or work remotely from their office.

Turnover intention was measured using a single item: "How likely is it that you will actively look for a new job next year?" on a 7-point scale (1: not at all likely-2-3: somewhat likely-4-5: quite likely–6-7: extremely likely) (mean=2.87, sd =1.83). Twenty questions were asked about reasons why respondents

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