

Preventing Job Turnover By Identifying What Makes People “Seekers” or “Stayers”

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The days of having employees who stick with one job for their entire career may be over. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the average American employee will stay in their current job for around 5 years and will hold an average of 11 different jobs by the time they're in their fifties. But replacing employees is often time consuming and expensive for organizations.

One strategy to help cut down on employee turnover is to better identify the factors that influence an employee's decision to stay put or look for greener pastures elsewhere.

In a recent study published in the *Journal of Business and Psychology*, psychological scientists Sang Eun Woo of Purdue University and David G. Allen of the University of Memphis identified several key factors that workers weigh before making the decision to jump ship: job satisfaction, job motivators, and personality traits.

The decision making process that underlies employees' decisions to stay or leave jobs varies tremendously across individuals. While one person may be happy and well-suited to their position, the guy down the hall may be miserable. An employee who isn't looking for anything new may get an offer she can't refuse from a competing business, while others may quit to go back to school or stay home with the kids. Even external factors like the economy impact people's readiness to switch jobs.

“Rather than solely focusing on factors affecting employees' voluntary turnover decisions, organizations can benefit from understanding what makes people want to stay, and whether there are more than one type of individuals with the same behavioral decisions,” write Woo and Allen.

For the study, 583 full-time workers employed in a variety of different industries took an online survey. Participants were asked about their employment history, current work experiences, turnover intentions, and job search, and they were also given assessments measuring their job satisfaction and personality characteristics.

Woo and Allen identified two major dimensions for grouping different types of turnover behavior: whether employees intend to stay or leave and whether they are taking concrete steps to find a new job.

By looking at different combinations of intention (stay or leave) and follow-through (actively looking or not) the researchers were able to identify four major categories of seeker-stayer behavior:

- “Embedded stayers” are happy with their jobs and unlikely to be searching for something new.
- “Detached stayers” are not motivated or excited about their current jobs, but are also unlikely to be on the job hunt.
- “Script-driven seekers” are happy with their current work, but have reasons outside of their job

for leaving, such as a better offer or a desire to spend more time at home.

- “Dissatisfied seekers” are unhappy employees actively looking for new opportunities.

Common retention management practices, such as exit interviews or attitude surveys, only identify leavers after they have made the decision to leave. By helping managers identify employees at the highest risk of leaving before they exit, organizations may be able to prevent turnover. The researchers caution that future research will be needed to link these turnover profiles to actual turnover behavior.

“By identifying profiles of individuals with different propensities to turnover, managers may be able to engage in more targeted retention interventions,” write Woo and Allen.

Reference

Woo, S. E., & Allen, D. G. (2014). Toward an Inductive Theory of Stayers and Seekers in the Organization. *Journal of Business and Psychology*, 29(4), 683-703. doi: 10.1007/s10869-013-9303-z