Causes of Employee Turnover: A Test of the Mobley, Griffeth, Hand, and Meglino Model

Charles E. Michaels
Hillsborough Community Mental Health Center, Tampa, Florida

Paul E. Spector
Florida Mental Health Institute
University of South Florida

This study was a test of the Mobley, Griffeth, Hand, and Meglino turnover model. Data from employees of a mental health facility were collected on several variables contained in the model, including perceived job characteristics, personal employee characteristics, job satisfaction, perceived alternative employment opportunities, intention of quitting the job, and turnover. Two variables were added to those in the model—confirmation of preemployment expectations and organizational commitment. The results of path analyses were consistent with the model, although with some modifications. Specifically, perceived alternative employment opportunities added nothing to the model as a direct cause of intention to quit or turnover, or as a moderator.

Turnover, or employee withdrawal, is a variable often included in organizational research. Perhaps its ease of collection has contributed to its widespread popularity as an objective, behavioral measure in a research domain often short of objective measures. Considering the number of studies including turnover as a variable, it is surprising to note how little systematic knowledge is available about its causes or antecedents. Although they were not the first to do so, Mobley, Griffeth, Hand, and Meglino (1979) pointed out that most of the turnover findings represent a series of well-established correlations with other variables. At least three comprehensive surveys in the past decade (Mobley et al., 1979; Porter & Steers, 1973; Price, 1977) have summarized these findings. Mobley et al. (1979) attempted to place them into a model tracing a chain of causes, or at least antecedents, of turnover.

Although there is considerable support for relationships between many of the variables in this model (see Mobley et al., 1979), few studies have investigated multivariate relationships, an essential step in the model's validation (Mobley et al., 1979, p. 520). There have been at least two exceptions that can be considered partial tests.

Requests for reprints should be sent to Paul E. Spector, Florida Mental Health Institute, 13301 North 30th Street, Tampa, Florida 33612.
support for the hypothesis that turnover is preceded by intentions of quitting, which are preceded by satisfaction. The role of age and tenure was less clear, and in fact with both samples, it was more strongly related to intentions of quitting than to job satisfaction. Finally, the contribution of perceived alternatives was equivocal. It seemed to contribute to the model's prediction of turnover in only one of three samples and then only to a modest degree.

Both of the aforementioned studies treated perceived alternatives as a direct precursor of intentions of quitting, rather than as a moderator of the relationship between these intentions and actual quitting. Although they did not test for this relationship, Mobley et al. (1978) mentioned the evidence for a moderator effect supplied by Dansereau, Cashman, and Graen (1974). In this study correlations were calculated between job satisfaction and turnover for a sample of subjects trichotomized on perceived alternative employment opportunities. Although they found a stronger correlation for the high group than for the low group (r = .27 vs. -.08), which was claimed as support, these correlations do not differ significantly when compared with z statistics. Thus Dansereau et al. (1974) provided weak evidence at best for a moderator role of perceived alternative employment.

The Current Study

A thorough test of all components of the Mobley et al. (1979) model would undoubtedly be beyond the scope of any single study. Hence for this study it was decided to limit the number of included variables to a manageable subset. Thus this investigation involved a sample of the several dozen variables specifically outlined in the model. Turnover was included as the final predicted product of all other variables. Immediately preceding turnover in the model is intentions of quitting the job, a variable also included. The model postulated three major antecedents of intentions, and two of these were chosen—job satisfaction and perceived alternative employment opportunities. The latter variable was considered less important to the present study, due to the mostly negative results with it in the literature. As antecedents of job satisfaction, several organizational and individual characteristics were chosen that have been shown to be related to satisfaction. On the organizational side were task characteristics, as measured by the Job Diagnostic Survey (JDS), and consideration behavior by the supervisor. Individual characteristics included age, tenure, salary, and job level.

Two additional variables omitted from the Mobley et al. (1979) model were included because they show promise as potential contributors to the turnover process. Confirmed preemployment expectancies have been suggested as a causal factor in turnover (Scott, 1972; Wanous, 1973). That is, when an employee discovers that a job is not what he or she believed it would be, turnover is a likely outcome. Consequently a retrospective confirmed expectancy variable was included as a possible precursor of job satisfaction.

Organizational commitment was the second variable added to the model. Commitment to the organization was discussed by Mobley et al. (1979) as potentially valuable in explaining turnover. In fact Mowday, Steers, and Porter (1979) suggested that organizational commitment might do better at predicting turnover than job satisfaction, although they did admit the evidence for superiority was equivocal. For the current study it was decided to include commitment in addition to job satisfaction to determine whether it contributed to the model above and beyond job satisfaction.

It was hypothesized that 12 variables would be related in such a way as to be consistent with the Mobley et al. (1979) model. That is, individual factors (salary, organizational level, age, tenure, and confirmed expectancies) and organizational factors (perceived job or task characteristics and perceived consideration behavior by the supervisor) would lead to job satisfaction and organizational commitment, which in concert with perceived alternative employment opportunities, would lead to intention of quitting, which would lead to turnover.

Method

Subjects

Subjects were 112 permanent employees of a community mental health center in an urban area of the
southeastern United States. Questionnaires were distributed to all 180 employees, of whom 124 (69%) returned them. Twelve were returned without the partial Social Security numbers by which turnover was matched, so they were eliminated from the analyses.

**Instruments**

An extensive battery of instruments was chosen including several existing scales and several items written specifically for the study. The instruments were placed into questionnaire packets suitable for distribution through interoffice mail. Specific measures included the following:

**Job Diagnostic Survey.** Hackman and Oldham's (Note 1) JDS was chosen as a measure of perceived job characteristics. The first 21 items of the survey were included to yield measures of skill variety, task identity, task significance, autonomy, feedback from the job, feedback from agents, and dealing with others, and a total motivation potential score (MPS) was derived from the first five subscales. It was felt that these job characteristics would be related to job satisfaction as found by Hackman and Oldham (Note 1), among others. They were also predicted to be an antecedent of commitment. For the path analysis the overall MPS was used. The reliabilities (coefficient alpha) of its components ranged from .69 to .79 in the current sample.

**Leadership consideration.** The Consideration subscale of the Leader Behavior Description Questionnaire (LBDQ; Stogdill, 1963) was chosen as another measure of organizational characteristics. This scale consists of 10 descriptive statements concerning consideration by the supervisor of subordinate feelings, problems, and input for decisions, as assessed by the subordinate. Internal consistency reliability (coefficient alpha) for this scale was .87.

**Personal characteristics.** Five questions were included asking about individual characteristics. These were age, job tenure, annual salary, and job level (supervisor vs. nonsupervisor). An additional question asked whether or not the job was "what you expected when you agreed to take it."

**Job satisfaction.** Job satisfaction was measured with the Job Satisfaction Survey (JSS), a nine-facet instrument developed by the current authors. This scale has 36 items in a six-choice agree/disagree format, resulting in nine subscale scores and a total satisfaction score. Subscales include satisfaction with pay, promotion, supervision, benefits, general rewards and appreciation, co-workers, work load and conditions, intrinsic nature of the job, and communication. For the path analysis the total satisfaction score was chosen, which had an internal consistency reliability of .89 in the present sample.

**Organizational commitment.** Commitment to the organization was assessed with Mowday et al.'s (1979) Organizational Commitment Questionnaire (OCQ). This scale has been used by these authors in the prediction of turnover (Mowday et al., 1979) and, as discussed previously, may be a better predictor of turnover than job satisfaction. It was included to test this possibility. The internal consistency reliability for the current sample was .90.

**Perceived alternative employment.** A single question was included asking the respondent to indicate his or her perception of how easy it would be to find acceptable alternative employment. The distribution of actual scores covered the entire 1-6 range, with a mean of 2.9 and a standard deviation of 1.4.

**Intention of quitting.** Three questions were included asking about intentions to quit the job. They asked how often the respondents seriously considered quitting the job, whether they wanted to quit, and whether they were actually planning to quit. A single score was derived by combining the three.

**Procedure**

Survey packets were distributed to employees through interoffice mail. Each packet contained the instruments described above, instructions, and a cover letter from the agency director asking for cooperation in an "organizational self-study." The study was presented as an administrative function, which it was in part, rather than a research project. Respondents were asked to return completed surveys through interoffice mail.

To track employees for determination of turnover, the questionnaire asked for the last four digits of the respondent's Social Security number. Six months after the survey, the personnel department supplied to the researchers the last four digits of all individuals who signed within the period of interest. These were matched to the questionnaires, and a turnover variable was created.

**Analysis**

The data analysis proceeded in two steps: zero-order correlations and path analysis. The zero-order correlations indicated the strength of relationship among the various components of the model, verifying that linkages of some sort existed. The path analysis is essentially a several step multiple regression procedure in which each variable is regressed against all those assumed to precede it in the model to be tested. Though it provides evidence that can support a hypothesized causal model, one must be cautious in interpreting such analyses, especially with correlated terms in the model that can contribute to instabilities in path coefficients (Asher, 1976, p. 48).

**Results**

Six months after completion of the questionnaires, a list of all turnovers was provided by the personnel department. It was found that 54 employees had terminated, representing 30% of the total staff. Of these, 17 (31%) had partial Social Security num-

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1 Details about the Job Satisfaction Survey are available from the authors.
2 Questionnaires were prepared in two versions to determine possible contaminating effects of instrument order. These results, indicating no effect of order, are described elsewhere (Spector & Michaels, Note 2).
bers matching returned surveys, a percentage smaller than for nonquitters (75%). Thus quitters were somewhat underrepresented relative to nonquitters, a phenomenon also reported by Wanous, Stumpf, and Bedrosian (1979).

**Zero-Order Correlations**

Table 1 indicates the zero-order correlations between the variables of interest in this study. All 12 variables in the table were those used in subsequent path analysis.

Perhaps the most important question answered by the correlations concerns whether turnover itself was related to any of the variables in this study, especially intention of quitting. As can be seen in the table, turnover and intention were correlated \(r = .41\). Turnover was also correlated significantly, although modestly, with organizational commitment and with total job satisfaction. Intention of quitting was correlated rather strongly with both commitment and satisfaction \((r = .61 \text{ and } .68, \text{ respectively})\) as well as with several other variables, although to a smaller degree. Total JSS and OCQ were intercorrelated \((r = .67)\) and showed the same general pattern of relationships with other variables, although JSS consistently had higher correlations. In summary, for the most part there were significant correlations between most of the adjacent variables in the Mobley et al. (1979) model. The exceptions were that salary, organizational level, and tenure were unrelated to turnover, intention, or anything else.

**Path Analysis**

A path analysis was conducted to test the hypothesized model using the multiple regression routine in the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS; Nie, Hull, Jenkins, Steinbrenner, & Bent, 1975). The analysis was a series of multiple regressions of each variable in the model, regressed on all preceding variables. The beta weights represent the path coefficients and indicate the relative strength of relationship between all variables in the analysis.

In the first stage of the analysis, all 12 variables illustrated in Figure 1 were entered. The figure has indicated only those

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**Table 1: Intercorrelation Matrix**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factor</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
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<th>9</th>
<th>10</th>
<th>11</th>
<th>12</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Turnover</td>
<td></td>
<td>.41*</td>
<td></td>
<td>.12</td>
<td></td>
<td>.60*</td>
<td></td>
<td>.01</td>
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<td>(90)</td>
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<td>2. Alternatives</td>
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<td>.16*</td>
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<td>.68*</td>
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<td>.05</td>
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<td>3. Total satisfaction</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td>.29*</td>
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<td>.11</td>
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<td>4. Total JSS</td>
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<td>.35*</td>
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<td>5. OCQ</td>
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<td>6. MPS</td>
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<td>.21*</td>
<td></td>
<td>.02</td>
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<td>7. JDS - MPS</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>.03</td>
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<td>8. Expectancy</td>
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<td>.06</td>
<td>.13</td>
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<td>9. Salary</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td>.16</td>
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<td>10. Tenure</td>
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<td>.15</td>
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<td>11. Level</td>
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Note. Diagonal entries in parentheses are reliabilities. JDS = Job Diagnostic Survey; MPS = motivation potential score; OCQ = Leader Behavior Questionnaire.

* \(p < .05\).
paths with statistically significant beta weights or path coefficients. As can be seen there were no significant direct paths not hypothesized by the model. However, the variables tenure, salary, organizational level, and perceived alternative employment had nonsignificant path coefficients.

Since perceived alternative employment was found not to be a direct antecedent of intention and was not directly related to turnover, a further analysis was conducted to determine whether it might moderate the relationship between job satisfaction and intention or turnover, or between intention and turnover. To accomplish this interaction, terms calculated as the product of intention with perceived alternative employment and total JSS with perceived alternative employment were added to the analysis. The path analysis was repeated two times, including one of the two product terms as an antecedent of turnover or intention. Neither product term had a significant path coefficient.

A final path analysis was conducted eliminating or trimming the nonsignificant variables. The path coefficients from these analyses are those shown in Figure 1. This final model, including only the seven significant predictors, accounted for 19% ($R = .44$) of the variance in turnover.

**Discussion**

The major purpose of this study was to test at least the major features of the Mobley et al. (1979) model of employee turnover. In addition to the factors described specifically in the model, two variables were added—organizational commitment and confirmed preemployment expectancies. Overall these results were supportive of the model, although they suggest some modifications.

The path analysis was consistent with the conception that organizational and individual factors, including confirmed expectancies, lead to job satisfaction and organizational commitment (except for confirmed expectancies), which in turn lead to intentions of quitting, which lead to turnover. More specifically, it was age, perceived task characteristics (measured by the JDS), and perceived consideration by the supervisor that led to total satisfaction and commitment (confirmed expectancies also led to satisfaction). Tenure, salary, and organizational level were not related to the other variables of interest in this study, although tenure and salary have been found in other studies to be related to turnover (Mobley et al., 1979) and level has been related to job satisfaction (Porter & Lawler, 1965). Perceived alternative employment opportunities could not be confirmed as a significant factor in the turnover process.

The lack of contribution to the model by the perceived alternative employment opportunity variable may help clarify the equivocal results of past research. The pres-

![Figure 1](image-url)
ent study investigated this variable as both a direct precursor of intention to quit and as a moderator of both intention to quit and satisfaction. It clearly made no contribution to the model in the current study. These results are consistent with Mobley et al. (1978), one sample of Miller et al. (1979), and the current reinterpretation of Dansereau et al. (1974), using perceived alternatives as a moderator.

Now the results of four studies cast doubt as to the role of perceived alternative employment in the turnover process. There is little doubt that labor market conditions affect turnover, but it may be more of a direct effect than hypothesized by the model. That is, rather than labor market acting directly through a psychological process as hypothesized, it may act directly on the behavior itself. If a person intends to quit a job, he or she most likely would quit when another job became available. Availability, then, controls the behavior in concert with intention, but not through intention. A person might well intend to quit as soon as another job has been offered, rather than when he or she believed one could be found. Obviously when the job market is good, opportunities to find alternative employment are plentiful and turnover is more likely.

Organizational commitment was omitted from the Mobley et al. (1979) model, although they did discuss it at length. It seemed to add predictability of intentions of quitting above that of total satisfaction alone. As noted by Mobley et al. (1979, p. 508) and Porter, Steers, Mowday, and Boulian (1974, p. 604), however, there is overlap between the commitment and intention constructs. In fact 4 of the 15 items of the OCQ involve the idea of leaving or changing jobs. Nevertheless in the present study commitment did not do quite as well as total satisfaction in predicting intention or turnover, although the differences were slight and certainly nonsignificant statistically.

The confirmed expectancy variable, which has been suggested as a cause of turnover (Dunnette, Arvey, & Banas, 1973; Porter & Steers, 1973; Scott, 1972), did emerge as an antecedent of total satisfaction, but not of organizational commitment. It was correlated somewhat with intention ($r = .32$), but not with turnover. Considering that the present measure was global, retrospective, and only a single item, it would seem worthwhile for future researchers to investigate this variable more thoroughly. It is further suggested that Mobley and his colleagues consider adding it to their model.

One must certainly be cautious in drawing causal conclusions from these data. Although they certainly support the model, they do not establish causal linkages. Consideration by the supervisor may lead to satisfaction, which may lead to intention, which may lead to turnover, but manipulating consideration at the beginning of the chain may not affect turnover at the end, even though satisfaction and intention might change. In fact consideration was correlated ($r = .81$) with supervisor satisfaction, but supervisor satisfaction was only modestly related to intention and was unrelated to turnover. Furthermore, the interpretation of beta weights with correlated predictors must be viewed with caution, as variable dependencies can lead to instability of the coefficients (Asher, 1976, p. 48). However, the high degree of consistency between the present findings and the preexisting model upon which the current study was based lends credence to these results, which do suggest a possible causal chain from individual and organizational factors, through job satisfaction and commitment, through intention, and finally, to turnover. However, this chain fails to account for a large amount of the variance in turnover. Labor market conditions certainly have a large influence through their impact on opportunities to acquire alternative employment. It may be that intention leads to search behavior, which leads to turnover when alternatives are available. Future researchers might do well to concentrate on this opportunity variable as a possible moderator of the relationship between intention and turnover as well as on features of the Mobley et al. (1979) model untested in this or other studies.

Reference Notes

of order as an artifact in organizational surveys. Manuscript submitted for publication, 1980.

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