An Exploratory Investigation of the Relationship between Disengagement, Exhaustion and Turnover Intention among IT Professionals Employed at a University

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ABSTRACT

Employee turnover among information technology (IT) professionals continues to be a major issue for the IT field (Armstrong & Riemenschneider, 2011; Carayon, Schoepke, Hoonakker, Haims, & Brunette, 2006; Moore, 2000a; Rigas, 2009). One reason for turnover among IT professionals is burnout that may result in turnover (Armstrong & Riemenschneider, 2011; Kalimo & Toppinen, 1995; McGee, 1996; Moore, 2000a). Using the Job Demands-Resources Model of Burnout as a conceptual framework, this non-experimental survey research study quantifies the relationships between exhaustion, disengagement, and turnover intention among IT professionals employed at a university located in a major metropolitan area. The online survey consisted of two survey instruments—the Oldenburg Burnout Inventory (OLBI) that measures the burnout dimensions of exhaustion and disengagement and the Michigan Organizational Assessment Questionnaire Job Satisfaction Subscale (MOAQ-JSS) that measures turnover intention. Exhaustion and disengagement were both significantly related to the two-item turnover measure. A stepwise regression model including exhaustion and disengagement explained 53% of the variance in turnover intention. Disengagement contributed significantly to the prediction of turnover intention after considering exhaustion in the regression model suggesting a unique contribution of the variable to the prediction of turnover intention. These findings underscore the importance of examining each dimension of burnout separately when predicting turnover intention among IT professionals.

Keywords: Burnout, Disengagement, Exhaustion, Information Technology (IT) Professionals, Turnover Intention, Universities

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INTRODUCTION

Turnover of skilled information technology (IT) professionals is a persistent challenge facing organizations and is a major issue for employers and recruiters of the IT workforce (Allen, Armstrong, Reid, & Riemenschneider, 2009; Armstrong & Riemenschneider, 2011; Carayon et al., 2006; Joseph, Ng, Koh, & Ang, 2007; 2000a, 2000b). With the rapid growth of and increasing reliance of the modern economy on technology, IT workers have become key resources in organizations as they design and maintain the infrastructure and operations that undergird the majority of critical functions in organizations (Dinger, Thatcher, Stepina, & Craig, 2012; Wang, Teo, & Yang, 2010). Even when there is an apparent lack of job opportunities, highly skilled IT professionals are still in great demand because of the continued sophistication of technology and the ever increasing needs of organizations to use technology to gain or sustain competitive advantage (Dinger et al., 2012; Uzoka, Mgaya, Shemi, Kitindi, & Akinnuwesi, 2011).

In that same vein, hiring and retaining university IT professionals has been a chronic problem on which universities report that they spend inordinate amounts of time and money identifying, developing, and recruiting IT professionals (EDUCAUSE, 2000; Golden, 2006; Grajek & Pirani, 2012). As learning technology and its associated fields continue to evolve, universities are experiencing increased dependence on IT professionals to maintain and improve many aspects of their day-to-day operations, including instruction, research and administration (EDUCAUSE, 2000; Grajek & Pirani, 2012; Ingerman & Yang, 2010). In a recent survey, 65% of higher education institutions reported that online learning is a critical part of their long-term strategy. In fact, over six million students took at least one online course during the Fall 2010 term, an increase of 560,000 students over the previous year (Allen & Seaman, 2011). With the increasing technological demands they face, universities can ill-afford to have a “revolving door” approach to managing and retaining IT employees. Because turnover is a consistent phenomenon that is both expensive and disruptive to operations, researchers and practitioners alike are focused on understanding the causes of turnover. This empirical study examines the two dimensions of burnout and their relationship to the turnover intention among IT professionals employed at a university located in a major metropolitan area.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

Many factors, some related to the work environment and some related to the individual, influence an employee’s commitment to the organization and satisfaction with his or her job (Harter, 2008; Moore, 2000a). Management studies have shown that job stress is a critical factor in an employee’s overall commitment, job satisfaction, and decision to leave their job (Sethi, Barrier, & King, 1999). Burnout—an advanced form of job stress—is a metaphor for the draining of energy and refers to the smothering of a fire or the extinguishing of a candle (Schaufeli, Leiter, & Maslach, 2009). Burnout has been recognized as an occupational hazard for various professions, including human services, education, health care and the public sector and is important to researchers because of its association with critical psychological and behavioral outcomes, such as employee well-being, productivity, withdrawal, and turnover (Maslach & Goldberg, 1998; Maslach, Schaufeli, & Leiter, 2001). Burnout may even hamper an employee’s capacity to provide intense contributions that make an impact at work (Schaufeli, Bakker, & Van Rhenen, 2009). Furthermore, research has linked job burnout to ailments including depression, physiological problems and family difficulties (Cropanzano, Rupp, & Byrne, 2003).

Recent empirical studies have demonstrated that burnout is not limited to just human services occupations and that IT professionals are particularly vulnerable to burnout (Armstrong & Riemenschneider, 2011; Carayon et al., 2006; Gallivan, Truex, & Kvasny, 2004; Kim
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