

Job Performance and Turnover

Thomas N. Martin

Department of Administrative Sciences
Southern Illinois University

J. L. Price and C. W. Mueller

Department of Sociology
University of Iowa

The literature on job performance and turnover generally indicates that employees who leave their organization are better performers. This hypothesized relationship was put to an empirical test for 162 female registered nurses who were evaluated by their unit supervisor or charge nurse using the 84-item Slater Nursing Competence Rating Scale. Nurses who left their jobs did not perform significantly better than those who stayed. Four issues related to advancing performance-withdrawal research are discussed. First, the combined use of objective measures and rater methods would improve performance measurement validity. Second, more than just professional employees in service organizations must be studied. Third, different types of people who leave must be investigated. Finally, withdrawal research must move beyond studying its determinants to studying its impact on a wide range of organizational properties.

Porter and Steers' (1973) classic review of the literature about turnover and absenteeism suggests that future research should direct "some attention . . . toward the study of differentially valued employees in relation to withdrawal" (p. 173). This research seeks to discover if the job performance of people who leave their jobs is significantly higher than the job performance of those who stay.

Based on current turnover theory, it is not clear whether the job performance of those who leave would be expected to be higher or lower than the job performance of those who stay. Some theoretical material suggests that high-performance employees would have more jobs available outside the organization, thus creating a greater likelihood that these employees will leave (Price, 1977, pp. 81-84). Other material, however, suggests that high-performance employees receive higher pay, thus reducing the likelihood that these employees will leave (Price, 1977, pp. 68-70).

From the perspective of organizational effectiveness (Etzioni, 1960), it makes a major difference to the organization whether or

not the job performance of those who leave is higher than those who stay. If an organization is disproportionately losing its high-performance employees, it is likely that its goal achievement will be adversely affected because these employees probably contribute more to goal achievement than do the low-performance employees.

As the preceding paragraph implicitly indicates, this research is relevant to the larger question of the impact of withdrawal behavior on the organization. Most of the existing withdrawal research focuses on its determinants and assumes that its impact on effectiveness is basically negative. Recently, however, scholars have urged that more focus be placed on the impact of withdrawal on the organization (Staw & Oldham, 1978) and have questioned its basically negative impact on effectiveness (Dalton & Todor, 1979; Price, 1977, pp. 92-120). This note attempts to supply some basic factual information about the job performance of those who leave and those who stay and to raise some issues to be investigated in future withdrawal research.

Review of the Literature

The data that do exist generally indicate that those who leave are predominantly better performers. Allison (Note 1) found that the uni-

Requests for reprints should be sent to Thomas N. Martin, Department of Administrative Sciences, College of Business and Administration, Southern Illinois University, Carbondale, Illinois 62901.

versity scientist most likely to leave is the one with many publications. Bassett's (Note 2) study revealed that employees who were rated as consistently improving their performance were 1½ times as likely to leave as employees rated stable or declining in their performance. Blau and Schoenherr (1971, pp. 244–245) found a disproportionate number of government bureau employees with the best qualifications and education resigning from their jobs. Lazarsfeld and Thielens (1958, pp. 9–10) concluded that turnover is characteristic of the more productive and presumably more able professors. A study by the Office of State Merit Systems (1968) indicated that the greatest proportion of new-entry professional employees leaving were those who had scored highest on entrance examinations. Pavalko (1970) indicated that turnover was higher among female elementary and secondary school teachers of higher intelligence. Finally, Pedersen (1973, pp. 73–104) confirmed Pavalko's results for female teachers and also found that males who had completed graduate education left public school teaching at a greater rate than their less educated colleagues.

Three studies provide contradictory data. Greeley (1977, pp. 155–156) found no evidence that American Catholic priests resigning from the priesthood were better educated or scored higher on measures of emotional maturity than those who remained. Although Pavalko (1970) found that turnover was higher among the more intelligent female teachers, he also found less turnover among those teachers as they acquired more academic education. Finally, Seybolt, Pavett, and Walker (1978) found that nurses who stayed were better performers than those who left.

A basic problem with many of the above studies is that performance is poorly measured. Variables such as intelligence, professional and educational credentials, or scores on entrance exams are used as surrogates for performance. Only Allison (Note 1), Bassett (Note 2), Lazarsfeld and Thielens (1958), and Seybolt et al. (1978) measured performance directly. Furthermore, only Bassett and Seybolt et al. utilized supervisor ratings of performance; the other studies utilized only self-ratings of performance. This study differs from the previous studies in that supervisor ratings of performance are measured by a reliable and behaviorally anchored rating instrument.

Method

The sample consisted of 162 nurses in a voluntary, short-term general hospital. This Catho-

lic-affiliated, 390-bed hospital is located in a medium-sized midwestern community of 62,000 residents.

All of the 162 nurses were female, non-supervisory, registered nurses. Their average age was 27 years, and their average length of service in the hospital was 4 years. Twenty percent held an associate degree, 72% held a diploma degree, 5% held a baccalaureate degree, and 3% held a graduate degree in nursing. Sixty-six percent worked full time; the remaining 34% worked part-time.

The Slater Nursing Competence Rating Scale (Slater, Note 3) was used to measure each nurse's performance. The 84-item scale lists specific nursing behaviors that are performed with, for, and on behalf of the patient and that represent the full range of nursing responsibilities for providing patient care. The scale is used to evaluate observed behaviors of nurses using the following six behavioral dimensions: actions directed toward meeting the psychosocial needs of individual patients; actions directed toward meeting psychosocial needs of patients as members of groups; actions directed toward meeting physical needs of patients; actions that may be directed toward meeting either psychosocial or physical needs of patients, or both at once; communications on behalf of the patients; and actions directed toward fulfilling the responsibilities of a nurse in all facets and varieties of patient care situations.

The evaluation of each nurse was made in 95% of the cases by the unit supervisor who worked on the day shift and whose responsibilities included both clinical and managerial duties. The remaining 5% of the evaluations were made by the evening or night charge nurse whose responsibilities included only clinical duties. Every nurse was evaluated by one person, either the unit supervisor or the charge nurse. Most of the performance evaluations were done on each nurse's hiring anniversary date, between October 1977 and December 1978. For the nurses who left before their anniversary arrived in this time period, their most recent performance evaluation was used. When the evaluation was completed, the mean score for each of the six behavioral dimensions was determined and the final 5-point performance measure (5 = excellent, 1 = poor) for each nurse was calculated as the mean of means. The overall performance mean for this sample was 2.86 ($SD = .69$).

Extensive testing of the scale has included use by some 50 instructors for over 2,500 evaluations of over 400 student nurses in four

diploma schools and one college of nursing. Item analysis indicates that instructors are able to discriminate among items and among students; stronger validity measures are unavailable. A split-half reliability test indicates a correlation of .985 (Slater, Note 3).

As part of research dealing with estimating a causal model of nursing turnover, longitudinal data about turnover were collected from the hospital's records in October 1977. Only the nurses who voluntarily left the hospital were termed "leavers" ($n = 23$). No nurses had retired, died, or been dismissed during the time of the study. Those remaining with the hospital were termed "stayers" ($n = 139$).

Results

It has been suggested in the literature that the better performers are the employees who disproportionately leave the organization. The zero-order correlation coefficient between the supervisors' performance ratings and nursing turnover (coded 0 for stayer and 1 for leaver) was .13. The mean performance score for leavers was 3.09 ($SD = .73$) compared with a mean performance score for stayers of 2.83 ($SD = .68$), thus indicating that leavers had higher performance ratings than stayers. The direction of the difference is in accordance with the majority of the literature reviewed.

Normally, the t test for differences between two means is the appropriate statistical test; however, the data for leavers and stayers does not come from large and similar-sized samples, and it is not known if the population variances are the same. In this situation, Hays (1973, p. 410) recommends that the variances should not be pooled for the t test and that the degrees of freedom should be corrected. This procedure resulted in a one-tailed test that was not significant at the .05 level, $t(28) = 1.625$, $p < .10$. These results do not support the claim that performance is significantly related to turnover.

Discussion

Further research on the relationship between job performance and withdrawal behavior must consider four issues. First, the issue of the validity of performance measures must be examined. Validity data are incomplete in both this study and Slater's (Note 3) original report. An additional validity problem inherent in Slater's instrument is the sole use of a supervisor rating method. Holzbach (1978) indicates that leniency errors, halo effects, and differential

dimensionality are potential problems with performance rater methods. Validity could be enhanced by combining rater methods with objective measures of performance. The nature of these objective measures would depend on the sample and organization studied. If nurses are studied, a number of nursing activities could be counted and then combined into an index of nursing performance. Specific activities could include the frequency of attending weekend and/or nursing conferences outside the hospital, nursing courses taken at colleges or universities, the regular reading of nursing journals, and the number of nursing papers submitted to conferences and/or journals.

The second issue concerns the need to explore other research settings. The literature has consistently examined only professional types of employees working in service organizations. Future research should examine nonprofessional employees in service organizations and all types of employees in goods-producing organizations.

The third issue reflects the need to distinguish between different types of leavers. For instance, empirical and conceptual distinction must be made between leavers who left their organization, those who left their occupations, and those who left the work force completely.

The fourth issue that requires investigation is the impact of withdrawal on the organization. Future research must do more than merely investigate whether the high performers are disproportionately concentrated among the leavers. Investigation is needed on the impact of various forms of withdrawal such as lateness, absenteeism, and turnover on a full range of organizational properties such as administrative intensity, formalization, integration, job satisfaction, innovation, and centralization (Price, 1977, pp. 92-120). The study of withdrawal has for too long been preoccupied with the question of determinants; it is time that more effort is devoted to the impact of withdrawal behavior on organizations.

Reference Notes

1. Allison, P. D. *Inter-organizational mobility of academic scientists*. Paper presented at the 69th annual meeting of the American Sociological Association, Montreal, Canada, April 1974.
2. Bassett, G. A. *A study of factors associated with turnover of exempt personnel*. Crotonville, N.Y.: Personnel & Industrial Relations Services, General Electric, 1967.
3. Slater, D. *The Slater Nursing Competence Rating Scale*. Detroit, Mich.: Wayne State University College of Nursing, 1967.

References

- Blau, P. M., & Schoenherr, R. *The structure of organizations*. New York: Basic Books, 1971.
- Dalton, D. R., & Todor, W. D. Turnover turned over: An expanded and positive perspective. *Academy of Management Review*, 1979, 4, 225-236.
- Etzioni, A. Two approaches to organizational analysis: A critique and a suggestion. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 1960, 5, 257-278.
- Greeley, A. M. *The American Catholic: A social portrait*. New York: Basic Books, 1977.
- Hays, W. L. *Statistics for the social sciences* (2nd ed.). Chicago: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1973.
- Holzbach, R. L. Rater bias in performance ratings: Superior, self-, and peer ratings. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 1978, 63, 579-588.
- Lazarsfeld, P. F., & Thielens, W. *The academic mind*. Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press, 1958.
- Office of State Merit Systems. *Analysis of appointment, separations, promotions*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, 1968.
- Pavalko, R. M. Recruitment to teaching: Patterns of selection and retention. *Sociology of Education*, 1970, 43, 340-353.
- Pedersen, K. G. *The itinerant schoolmaster*. Chicago: Midwest Administration Center, University of Chicago, 1973.
- Porter, L. W., & Steers, R. M. Organization, work, and personal factors in employee turnover and absenteeism. *Psychological Bulletin*, 1973, 80, 151-176.
- Price, J. L. *The study of turnover*. Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1977.
- Seybolt, J. W., Pavett, C., & Walker, D. D. Turnover among nurses: It can be managed. *Journal of Nursing Administration*, 1978, 9, 4-9.
- Staw, B. M., & Oldham, G. R. Reconsidering our dependent variables: A critique and empirical study. *Academy of Management Journal*, 1978, 21, 539-559.

Received February 11, 1980 ■