

# An Explicative and Predictive Study of Employee Attrition

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## Abstract

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## 1. Introduction

Building and maintaining a stable, productive, collaborative, and high-quality workforce is a primary concern for the majority of managing principals as success in this area tends to be a key factor contributing the overall firm prosperity [CITATIONS?]. Inevitably, all firms will experience employee attrition. Involuntary attrition is often the result of profitability and performance pressures, department or business line obsolescence, and mergers and acquisitions, among other factors [CITATIONS?]. In contrast, voluntary attrition is driven predominately by employee concerns [CITATIONS]. Such considerations my focussed around, but not limited to, managerial direction, compensation and benefits, firm culture, firm desirability and location, promotion potential as well as non firm specific motivations, e.g. medical conditions or retirement.

A central objective of the majority of human resource departments is to understand the root causes behind voluntary employee attrition and develop an associated mitigation strategy. Effectively navigating such issues generally resulted in explicit positive monetary effects stemming from increased firm revenue and cost reductions manifested through the work retained highly performant employees. In addition, identifying and resolving issues found to be common to employee attrition often implicitly enhances firm culture and workplace desirably which in turn enables the recruitment of higher quality staff which further improve retention, firm operation, and business practices. We feel that the compounding effect nature of this employee attrition feedback loop on the overall success or failure of the firm is the essential motive for conducting a through investigation into this matter. [MORE CITATIONS FOR THIS PARAGRAPH]

Traditionally, employee attrition and retention issues tend to examined through qualitative and anecdotal measures. Specifically, human resources staff tend to conduct exit interviews after an employee provides a resignation notice in order to ascertain the motivations behind the decision to leave. Although these conversations may be direct and candid, i.e. in the event an employee is leaving for a significantly more senior role or needs to change geographic location for family reasons, in actuality, human resources staff encounter considerable difficulty discerning the employee's actual rationale. By way of example, employees seldom offer negative criticism of management during exit interviews for fear of future personal retribution or inadvertent retaliation towards their close colleagues who will still remain at the firm. These circumstances impact the employee attrition data aggregation and quality assurance process by making it cumbersome, at a minimum, which leads to additional difficulties determining which attrition issues should be of primary importance for management to resolve. In addition, employee attrition data is typically high confidential and only accessible to key stakeholders internally within a firm. This fact has been a major impediment for the progression of academic research on this topic. [CITATIONS]

Recently, internet based platforms such as GlassDoor and LinkedIn oriented towards working professionals have amassed large quantities of publicly available information related to individual employee resumes including employment history, frank reviews of firm culture, desirability, and management as well as anonymous feedback. Although this data often lacks attritional motivation information at the individual employee level, when combined with aggregate firm culture and management rankings, one may glean a number of insights into the collective behavior and motivations behind individual decisions to transition to a new employer. Our major aim is precisely in this vein. More specifically, we conduct a quantitative data analysis of employee attrition motivations as

well as develop predictive models that will enable human resources staff identify employees whose firm separation may be imminent.

We extend the work of [1] who examine employee attrition and retention issues based upon a collection of approximately five thousand anonymously submitted resumes to Glassdoor. We provide SUMMARY OF DATA ANALYSIS EXTENSIONS. In addition, SUMMARY OF NEW MODELS. Lastly, we delineate future data acquisition, analysis and model development extensions that we seek to investigate in future work.

This article is organized as follows ... TYPE WHEN FINISHED

## **2. Data Description and Feature Engineering**

We first turn to describing the content extracted from a collection of employee resumes that will form the basis for the subsequent attrition studies. Next, we provide a variety of summary statistics of this information that are relevant for the design of latter predictive models. Then we discuss our data normalization process and several features constructed from this original data which will be utilized as input into these models. In addition, we outline limitations of this dataset and ideas for improvement in future work.

### **2.1. Data Source Description**

We worked in conjunction with the authors of [1] to obtain a collection of 5550 examples of employee job transitions between 2007 and 2016 which were sourced from an extensive proprietary database of resumes shared anonymously through Glassdoor's platform. A job transition is defined to be any instance of an employee listing a new role on their resume which may be associated with the present or original or a new employer designated as internal and external moves. Internal moves are typically significant in the sense of the employee either changing roles or being promoted within an organization as opposed to being reassigned within a current team. External moves are of interest for our attrition studies as in this situation employees leave their original firm entirely.

We summarize several salient features of the dataset construction process and expound upon details relevant to model development below; we refer the reader to [1] for a complete description of the data source.

Each employee job transition contains 45 attributes. Relevant attributes include employee specific information. Namely, a binary identifier indicating if the employee remained within or left their original firm, the start and end dates of employment at the

original firm, the employee's average salary during their tenure with the original employer, and the employee's job title. In addition, each transition includes employer related information. Specifically, employer name and metro location, the industry sector of which the employer is a member, the founding year of the firm, and the total number of employees. Finally, employer rating information is included. Particular ratings are given for the following GlassDoor created categories: overall, firm CEO, friend recommendation business outlook, career opportunities, compensation and benefits, culture and values, worklife balance, and senior management. We note that in the event the employee transitioned to a new firm, when applicable, the above information specific to both the original and new employer is present in this dataset. Finally, this dataset is fully populated with the exception of missing values in approximately 6% of the original and new employer founding year values, respectively; such null values are disregarded only in studies that depend upon this variable below.

### **2.2. Summary Statistics, Feature Engineering and Data Normalization**

First, several summary statistics are presented in order to outline the main content of the dataset that will be further explored below. Next, we discuss our feature construction process to build variables that will be important to latter exploratory studies and predictive model design. Finally, we describe the quantile normalization process we use in order to ensure all variables are on the same scale prior to being input into the predictive models.

Of the 5550 total employee job transitions in this dataset, a total of 1429 employees remained at their present firm whereas a majority of 4121 transitioned to a new firm. This confirms a claim [1] indicating that approximately three quarters of employees leave their employer during a job transition. We now graphically summarize several distributional aspects of attributes associated with these transitions.

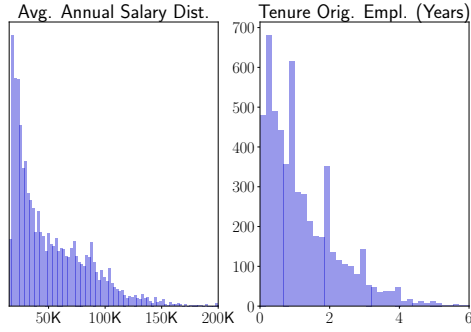
Compensation, benefits, and other forms of financial remuneration are typically play a critical role in an employee's job selection process. In fact, an offer to substantially increase one's salary is a common impetus for a job transition. In the left subplot of Figure 1, we plot the average annual salary distribution of the employer during their tenure at their original employer over our full dataset. Salaries ranged from \$15,140 to \$240,000 per year. We note that this sample is slightly overweight in terms of the representation of low-wage workers in comparison with national income

**Table 1. Transition Counts Per Industry**

Industry	Cnt.	Industry	Cnt.
Retail	1357	Manufact.	191
Education	766	Insurance	144
Info. Tech.	718	Media	113
Finance	590	Acct. & Legal	101
Bus. Services	369	Energy	92
Food Services	275	Travel	70
Telecom	248	Biotech	62
Health Care	208	Transportation	58

Original employer sector counts for industries with more than 50 job transitions.

distributions [CITE]. In addition, approximately 9% of workers have salaries greater than \$100,000, which further indicates a slight low-wage bias with respect to the entire US workforce population. However, we note the generate shape of this distribution does indeed closely approximate that of the full workforce [CITE]. In the right subplot of Figure 1, we display

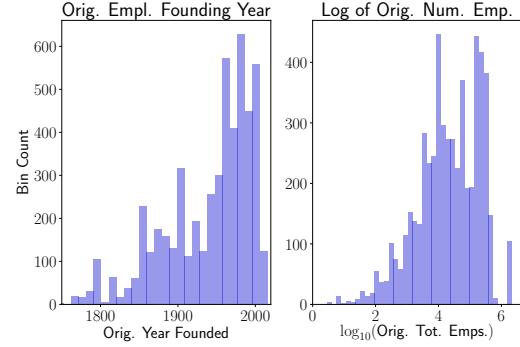


**Figure 1. Employee average salary and tenure distribution at Original employer**

the tenure of each employee at their original employer prior to a job transition which is similar to summary information presented in [1]. Note that overall these tenures are relatively short and the distribution exhibits concentrated counts near end of year times when performance reviews typically take place.

Next, in table 1, we count the industry of the original employer of all job transitions being considered and display all such industries exceeding 50 such transitions. Note that the Retail and Education industries are overrepresented which provides a further indication as to why lower salaries are also above those of the national distribution. In addition, we have sufficient data to study employee industry transition patterns for many of the industries listed in this table which we explore in more detail in the subsequent section.

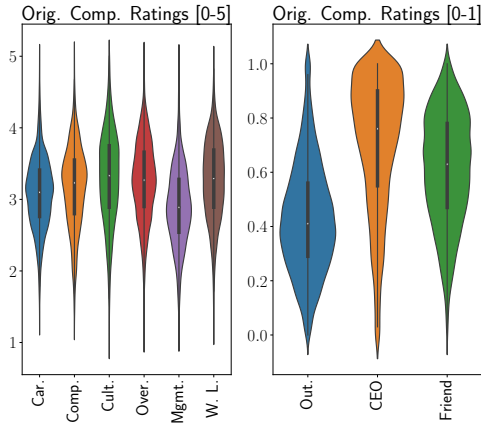
In Figure 2, we display two additional histograms related to original employer specific information. In the left subplot, we present the distribution of the original firm's founding date. This histogram was left truncated to begin at 1750 with a minimum founding date of 1625 for the City of New York. Typically, firms with earlier founding dates are municipalities or governmental organizations. Note that we have an



**Figure 2. Original employer founding year and employee number distributions**

effective samplings of older and modern firms with a median founding date of 1962. In addition, we consider relatively few firms that were founded within the past twenty years in this sample as indicated by the height of the final bar of the histogram. Next, in the right subplot of Figure 2, we display the log-histogram of the number of employees at each original firm being considered. The majority of employees work at larger firms which employ between ten thousand and one million people. In particular, only a small fraction of employees work at small firms with fewer than one hundred colleagues. Finally, the largest employer is Walmart with approximately 2.2 million employees.

Next, in Figure 3, we display original employer violin plots of ratings data in nine categories which includes career opportunities, compensation and benefits, company culture, overall rating, senior management, work-life balance, outlook, CEO, and friend recommendation ratings. Here mean values are depicted by white circles in each form whereas standard deviations about either side of the mean are displayed by centered black bars. The general shape of each violin is determined by a symmetric display of a kernel density estimate of the probability distribution of each rating variable. Ratings with values in the  $[0, 5]$  range are plotted in the left subplot and those between  $[0, 1]$  range are plotted in the right. We note that no actual ratings fall outside these bounds; the slight graphical extensions beyond these boundaries in the plot are due to artifacts



**Figure 3. Violin plots of original employer ratings information sourced from Glassdoor reviews**

of the kernel density estimation procedure required to produce the visualization and not representative of the true data. In addition note that one can see management ratings tend to be lower overall than other related ratings in the left subplot. In addition, cultural ratings exhibit the greatest dispersion, whereas career ratings are comparatively concentrated. The distribution of  $[0, 1]$  vary considerably. In particular, the CEO rating distribution is concentrated to the right of the mean largely to a high occurrence of the maximum rating in approximately 9% of the data. In contrast, company outlook ratings are right-skewed with a mean below the average score of 0.5. Both are less dispersed than the friend recommendation rating distribution that also is slightly oriented towards the positive side.

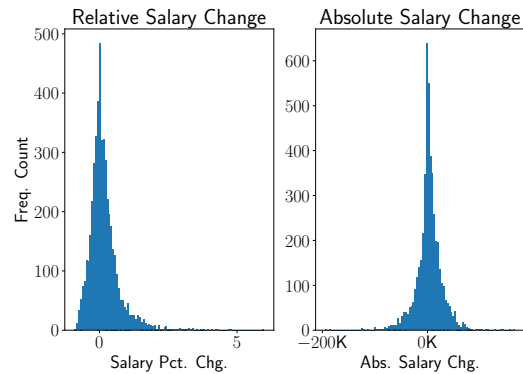
We now describe several elementary features that we construct from the original data that will be useful in the below exploratory and predictive studies. In particular, we will consider the percentage salary increase between after a transition has been made. In addition, we will consider quantile normalized absolute changes in each rating category below, e.g. if an employee moved from a 75%-tile overall rating employer to an 85%-tile, we will save the 10%-ile difference as a feature. We feel these features are partially reflect the thought process of an employee who typically leaves an organization for higher salary and improved company culture based on the relative rather than absolute differences in these variables and thus include them as features. We finally note that all variables are quantile normalized in our predictive model studies so as not to bias methods considered due to scaling effects.

### 3. Exploratory Insights

Now we describe a number of findings that were the results of an exploratory analysis of the job transition dataset which go beyond the level of summary statistics. In particular, DESCRIBE FINDINGS WHEN FINISHED

#### 3.1. Transition Salary Changes

An opportunity to earn a greater salary is often described as a primary motivation for a job transition. We seek to investigate this from a quantitative perspective on our attrition dataset. We first note that approximately 13% of transitions occurred without a change in salary. In Table 4, we display relative (percentage increase/decrease) and absolute salary changes. First note that this example illustrates the



**Figure 4. Relative and absolute salary differences after a job transition**

need for considering features such as relative change since the asymmetry of the relative change salary distribution is prominent whereas this is not as clear in the absolute change plot. Second, note that there is a wide range of magnitudes of relative salary changes. In particular, approximately 5% of employees received a salary increase of more than 150%. In addition, 36% took a reduction in salary as a part of their transition. However, the remainder received a salary increase which was in many cases quite substantial.

In the extreme case, one employee transitioned from a teaching assistant to education Director at Michigan State University and received approximately a 6X salary increase. In the opposite direction, one employee transitioned from a \$230,000 salary as a Managing Director in the Education industry to a Logistics coordinator with a \$43,600 annual salary.

### 3.2. Industry Transition Patterns

Next, we examine how employers either choose to move to a new industry or remain in that of their origination firm as a consequence of their job transition. In Figure 5, we display a heatmap of the percentage of employees that started in an industry indicated by the left row labels and transitioned into the industry on the lower column label. Note that both the energy and retail industries

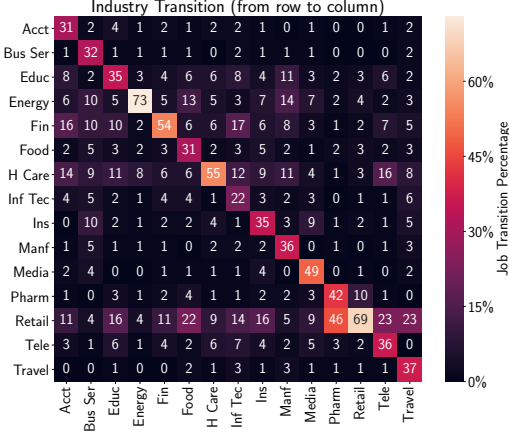


Figure 5. Industry transition percentage: original firm industry given in columns and new/same in rows

tend to retain a considerably greater portion of their employees than the others. An interesting example along these lines is the Pharmaceutical industry of which 46% of employees transition to the retail industry while only 42% remain; this is the only industry that exhibits that feature. Moreover, the information technology industry has the lowest retention rate with more than half of transitions out of this industry going to the financial, health care, retail, and education sectors. This is understandable due to the skill requirements prevalence of IT positions across all these industries. Finally, we note that the retail industry is the most popular industry to transition into overall from a distinct original sector.

### 3.3. Attrition Identification Variable Importance

Now, we separate out attrition dataset into the group of job transitions where employees remained with their current employer, and those who choose to find a new employer. We compared the distributions of all numerical variables available in this dataset for both groups in order to identify which variables has the most distinct distributions. In Figure 6, we display the distributions the original firm friend recommendation

and worklife balance rating variables for employees who stayed with their original firm (green) or transition to a new one (red). In addition, we note that the

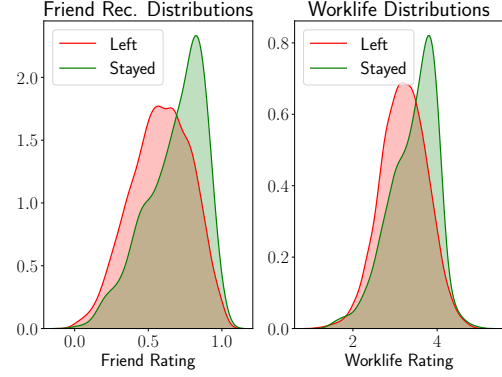


Figure 6. Friend recommendation and worklife rating distribution for internal and external transitions

cultural rating distributions exhibited a similar although less pronounced behavior. This provides an indication that both these variables will be of importance when attempting to discriminate between the two groups in our latter predictive studies.

### 3.4. Firm Ratings Principal Components

When users fill out Glassdoor surveys that ultimately determine the company ratings provided in the attrition dataset, they are asked to rate a firm in the nine categories described in Section 2.1. It is natural to allow one's overall view on the firm influence the manner in which ratings are assigned for each of these categories, i.e. they are not necessarily independent. We will conduct a principal component analysis on a quantile normalized version of our full original ratings dataset of nine categories in order to ascertain the effective dimensionality of this information.

Specifically, let  $r_i^j$  for  $i = 1, \dots, n = 5550$  and  $j = 1, \dots, 9$  denote the  $i$  ratings available for category  $j$ . Consider the sample covariance estimator of the quantile normalized ratings data

$$\hat{\Sigma} = \frac{1}{n-1} \sum_{i=1}^n (r_i^j - \bar{r}^j)(r_i^j - \bar{r}^j)^T. \quad (1)$$

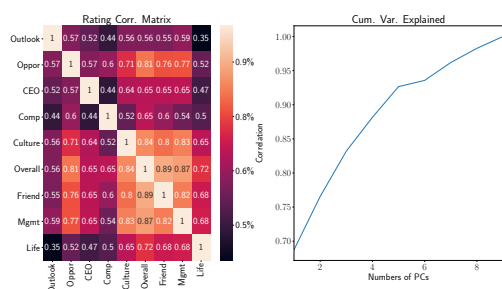
where here  $\bar{r}^j$  denotes the mean value of the  $j$ -th variable. Then, we perform an eigen-decomposition

$$\hat{\Sigma} = Q\Lambda Q^{-1} \quad (2)$$

where here the  $i$ -th vector of  $Q$  is the  $i$ -th eigenvector of  $\hat{\Sigma}$  with corresponding eigenvalue  $\lambda_i$  which is the  $(i, i)$

entry of the diagonal matrix  $\Lambda$ . This decomposition holds since  $\hat{\Sigma}$  is assumed to be positive definition, and addition, we take an ordering  $\lambda_1 \geq \lambda_2 \geq \dots \geq \lambda_9$ , c.f. [2] for an overview of principal component analysis.

In Figure, 7, in the left subplot we display a heatmap of the original employer ranking correlation matrix. Note that all such values are generally ranking variables are highly correlated which demonstrates that it is necessary to account for the dependency structure of the ranking variables. In the left subplot, we display the percentage variance explained curve whose values are defined to be  $w_i = \sum_{j=1}^i \lambda_j / \sum_{j=1}^9 \lambda_j$ . The first



**Figure 7. Original employer ranking correlation matrix and percentage variance explained curve**

principal component contains just under 70% of the variation of the data and is given in normalized form by

$$q_1 = [0.27, 0.34, 0.30, 0.28, 0.36, 0.38, 0.37, 0.37, 0.30] \quad (3)$$

which is near a uniform weighted average of the rankings with additional weight placed on career opportunities, overall, and friend recommendation, senior management rankings. In addition the percentage variance explained gradually increases to approximately 92% at five principal components and there is no clear separation between the signal and noise portions of this data. We conclude that it will be useful to include the quantile normalized ranking weighted average in our subsequent predictive studies, but we also retain all ratings variables given these percentage variance explained results.

### 3.5. Idea 5: THINK OF IDEA

## 4. Towards an Attrition Model

We now focus on extending beyond the prior exploratory data analysis and systematically construct a series of refined models to predict whether an employee will remain with their original employer or leave for another firm during a job transition. ADD SUMMARY AFTER FINISHED

### 4.1. Linear Review

First, we recall the linear model in [1] where the authors found

### 4.2. Logistic Work

### 4.3. Binary Classifier

### 4.4. Model Performance Comparison

## 5. Conclusions and Extensions

Here we describe several ideas to pursue as part of this study

Mention limitations here (same as in glassdoor article and others that we find) ... then mention that our extensions will overcome these limitations

- company specific analytics – competitive analysis
- linkedin, full glassdoor dataset – outlier determination may serve as a glassdoor fake review filter

**Acknowledgements:** The authors would like to ack... for sharing data FINISH WHEN DONE

## References

- [1] M. Smart and A. Chamberlain, “Why do workers quit? the factors that predict employee turnover,” *Glassdoor Research Report Whitepaper*, pp. 1–19, 2016.
- [2] J. Shlens, “A tutorial on principal component analysis,” *Systems Neurobiology Laboratory, Salk Institute for Biological Studies*, 2005.
1. how does salary increase compare with internal vs external transition?
2. Founding date vs tenure
3. Let’s focus on Leaving a company, not just different role in same company
4. job title transition? progression ... Markov chain?
5. What other summary statistics are relevant that go beyond what is already in the Glassdoor article?
6. Do a brief literature review. What has been done in this area already? Summarize Glassdoor as part of this ... describe the uniqueness of this dataset. Mention it would be of interest to expand ... mine LinkedIn as well to do a more thorough study later.
7. do reasons vary by length of job???
8. Look at people who made a major change (e.g. shifted geographic regions. ... more than 500 miles away ... is motivation any different for these people?)
9. Look at how old vs new ranking variable scatter plots differ from the  $y=x$  line, e.g. if employees change, which variables to we find also change significantly? Do some change always in the upwards direction? Linear reg. essentially tries to understand to what extent is this line differs from 1, e.g. if it is 1 for a given variable, then this variable has no influence ... can we develop a better variable influence measure here?

10. Look at people who switched industries ... any different motivation here?
11. One interesting feature is that employees seldom seem to stay at a company that has the same size as their old one. Lots of shifts from large to small or vice versa. Perhaps make this more quantitative?
12. check if job-len corresponds to start,end date difference
13. Any info associated with geographic studies? Large vs small cities?
14. patterns that stem from either age or employment tenure?
15. binary model classifier, ROC curve etc.
16. impl their original regression model ... test
17. industry specific studies
18. Distribution of dates that changes were made ... do we see a pattern on times of the year that moves occurred
19. explore patterns between old and new firms using year founded