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JOB CHARACTERISTICS, JOB EMBEDDEDNESS, AND TURNOVER INTENTION: THE CASE OF VIETNAM

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Job Embeddedness (JE) has recently become an important construct in the voluntary turnover research. However, there are a very limited number of studies on the antecedents of JE as well as studies across cultures. This study, therefore, investigated how job characteristics influence JE and turnover intention in the context of Vietnam. The results indicated that job characteristics not only directly influence JE, but also affect turnover intention via the mediation effect of JE. Implications, limitations of the study, and future research are discussed.

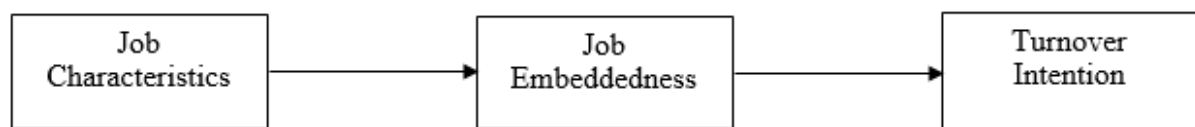
Keywords: Job characteristics, job embeddedness, turnover intention, Vietnam

INTRODUCTION

Since its first introduction by Mitchell, Holtom, Lee, Sablinski and Erez (2001), job embeddedness (JE) has become an important construct in the study of employee voluntary turnover. JE has been found to explain significant incremental variance in turnover beyond that explained by variables traditionally studied in turnover research, including job satisfaction, organizational commitment, job alternatives, and job search (Mitchell et al., 2001; Lee, Mitchell, Sablinski, Burton, & Holtom, 2004; Besich, 2005). JE has also been found to predict other key organizational outcomes such as absenteeism, job performance, and citizenship behaviors (Lee et al., 2004). However, there are two important gaps in the JE literature that need further research in order to better understand this construct and its relationship with other factors in organizations. First, there is not a complete understanding of the organizational antecedents of JE. Although Giosan (2003) examined how the personal characteristics of employees and their work perceptions influence JE, there is not yet any study investigating the impact of job characteristics on JE. Second, there have been a very limited number of studies which examine the JE construct in different workforce populations or cultures. Most of the studies to date have been carried out in the United States and were limited to a few organizations in a small number of industries.

This study, therefore, attempts to fill in these gaps by investigating the relationships among job characteristics, JE, and turnover intention in the country of Vietnam. The theoretical framework of the study is shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Proposed Theoretical Framework



RESEARCH BACKGROUND AND HYPOTHESES

Job Embeddedness and Job Characteristics

JE is defined as “an overall construct conceptualized as the combined forces that keep a person from leaving his or her job” (Yao, Lee, Mitchell, Burton, & Sablinski, 2003, p.156). It is described as being similar to a net or a web in which an individual can become enmeshed. JE consists of three critical aspects: (1) “links,” or the extent to which people have connections to other people or activities, (2) “fit,” the extent to which their jobs and communities are similar to or fit with other aspects of their lives, and (3) “sacrifice,” which refers to the ease with which links can be broken (i.e., the things employees would give up if they left the employer, especially if they had to physically relocate to other places). These link, fit, and sacrifice embed employees into their jobs and keep them from leaving their organization (Mitchell et al., 2001).

Job characteristics are the attributes of jobs that can have motivational influences on employees. The most well-known and influential job characteristics model comes from Hackman and Oldham (1975, 1976, & 1980). This model identifies five core job characteristics: skill variety, task identity, task significance, autonomy, and feedback. Skill variety is the degree to which a job requires the worker to use a number of different skills and talents. Task identity is the extent to which the job requires completion of a whole and identifiable piece of work, or doing a task from beginning to end with a visible outcome. Task significance is the degree to which the job has a substantial impact on the lives or work of other people. Autonomy is the extent to which the job provides substantial freedom, independence and discretion to the individual in scheduling the work and in determining the procedures to be used in carrying it out. Feedback is the degree to which the job provides direct and clear information about the level of effectiveness of one’s performance.

Comprehensive theoretical and empirical studies have demonstrated that these five core job characteristics influence employee work outcomes. That is, the greater the meaningfulness of the job (skill variety, task identity, and task significance) as well as the more experienced responsibility (autonomy) and the more knowledge of results (feedback), the greater will be employees’ motivation, performance, commitment, and satisfaction, and the lower their absenteeism and likelihood of leaving the organization (Turner & Lawrence, 1965; Brief & Aldag, 1975; Hackman & Oldham, 1975, 1980; Roberts & Glick, 1981; Loher, Noe, Moeller, & Fitzgerald, 1985; Fried & Ferris, 1987; Champoux, 1991; Spector & Jex, 1991).

There are also reasons to believe that these five core job characteristics would affect employee JE. First, in regards to person-job fit, individuals’ perceptions of how well they fit with a particular job are strongly influenced by the five core job characteristics (Ehrhart, 2006). This means that if employees think the characteristics of their jobs are favorable (e.g., the job is meaningful), then they feel a better fit with their jobs. Thus, the job characteristics would be positively related to the fit-organization dimension of JE.

Second, from the point of view of motivation-performance process, job characteristics create intrinsic motivation (Fried & Ferris, 1987), and intrinsically motivated employees engage more in their jobs (Staw, 1977; Hackman & Oldham, 1980; Kanfer, 1991). This motivation and engagement can improve employees’ acquisition of task-related knowledge and skills (Kanfer, 1991). The knowledge and skills acquired would help employees perform their jobs better and as a result employees would fit better in their job. In addition, positive effects derived from satisfaction and task accomplishment would also create employees’ feeling of greater fit with their job.

Third, from field experiments of job redesign interventions, employees are more likely to stay in their job when their job is enriched (e.g., the job is given more autonomy or more skill variety) (Griffeth, 1985; Locke, Sirota, & Wolfson, 1976; Orpen, 1979; McEvoy & Cascio, 1985). This means that changes in job characteristics would influence an employee’s level of job attachment. In other words, job characteristics would be related to JE.

Last, regarding the sacrifice dimension of JE, the intrinsic rewards from job characteristics may be one of the reasons that keep employees from leaving their job, because doing so would mean they have to give up

those positive feelings and rewards. Therefore, overall it is expected that job characteristics would positively influence employee JE.

Hypothesis 1: The five core job characteristics (skill variety, task identity, task significance, autonomy, and feedback) will be positively related to job embeddedness.

Job Embeddedness and Turnover Intention

According to Mitchell et al. (2001), the three dimensions of JE would embed employees into their jobs and keep them from leaving the organization. First, the greater number of connections or links an employee has with other team members, supervisors, and others in the organization, the more she or he is bound to the job and the organization, and therefore less likely he or she is to quit (Mitchell et al., 2001). This relationship has been supported by a variety of previous studies (e.g., Prestholdt, Lane, & Mathews, 1987; Abelson, 1987; O'Reilly, Caldwell, & Barnett, 1989; Maertz, Stevens, & Campion, 2003). Second, the more an employee's personal values, career goals, and plans for the future fit with the larger corporate culture and the demands of his or her immediate job (job knowledge, skills, and abilities), the higher the likelihood that employee will feel professionally and personally tied to that organization and less likely to quit (Mitchell et al., 2001). Previous research has also supported this idea (O'Reilly, Chatman, & Caldwell, 1991; Chatman, 1991; Villanova, Bernardin, Johnson, & Dahmus, 1994). Third, the more material and psychological benefits (such as salary, bonuses, pension, promotional opportunities, and friends and colleagues) an employee would sacrifice by leaving, the more difficult it will be for him or her to break employment with the organization (Mitchell et al., 2001; Shaw, Delery, Jenkins, & Gupta, 1998).

Therefore, overall, there would be a negative relationship between JE and employee intention to quit.

Hypothesis 2: Job embeddedness will be negatively related to turnover intention.

Mediation Effect of Job Embeddedness

Previous research has found a direct and negative relationship between job characteristics and employee intention to quit (e.g., Fried & Ferris, 1987; Spector & Jex, 1991). That is, the more favorable job characteristics an employee has, the less likely he or she intends to quit. However, as discussed above, job characteristics would influence JE, and then JE would influence employee intention to quit. This means that JE would probably mediate the relationship between job characteristics and turnover intention. In other words, the relationship between job characteristics and employee intention to quit may not be direct but indirect via the mediation effect of JE. Employees would fit better into their jobs if the job characteristics are favorable (Ehrhart, 2006) and would feel more sacrifice if they decide to leave the organization. These fit and sacrifice would keep employees from leaving their jobs. Thus, the following hypothesis is proposed:

Hypothesis 3: Job embeddedness will mediate the relationship between job characteristics and turnover intention.

METHOD

Sample

A written survey questionnaire was utilized to collect data from employees in a state-owned company in Hanoi, Vietnam. Of the 473 survey questionnaires distributed to company employees, a total of 325 (68.7%) were returned. Thirty three (33) of the 325 were either incomplete and/or had conflicting answers. The total number of usable surveys, therefore, was 292, producing an effective response rate of 61.7 percent. Participants were mostly males (66.9%), married (78%), and have an average age of 34.4 years.

Measures

Job Embeddedness. JE was measured by using Crossley, Bennett, Jex, and Burnfield's (2007) seven-item scale. This measure has been demonstrated very good reliability (e.g., coefficient alpha = .89 in Crossley et al.'s study, and = .85 in this current study). Sample items include, "I feel attached to this organization" and "I am too caught up in this organization to leave."

Turnover Intention. Turnover intention was measured by a five-item scale developed by Crossley, Grauer, Lin, and Stanton (2002). Reliability for this scale has previously been very good (e.g., $\alpha = .89$ in Crossley et al.'s 2002 study, and = .84 in this current study). A sample item is "I intend to leave this organization soon".

Job Characteristics. The five core job characteristics were measured using the revised scales from the Job Diagnostic Survey (JDS) (Hackman and Oldham, 1980) developed by Idaszak and Drasgow (1987). Research has shown that these conform more closely to the hypothesized five-factor structure than do the original job characteristics items (Idaszak & Drasgow, 1987; Kulik, Oldham & Langner, 1988; Cordery & Sevastos, 1993; Harvey, Billings, & Nilan, 1985), thus suggesting the revised version is a better measure. Each sub-scale of job characteristics (skill variety, task identity, task significance, autonomy, and feedback) consists of two items. For example, an item of skill variety is "The job requires me to use a number of complex or high-level skills".

Prior research on the job characteristics model has suggested that a combination or grouping of the five core job characteristics, reflecting job complexity, is a better predictor of the model's outcomes than any single job characteristic (Fried & Ferris, 1987). Previous research has also used an additive index of the five job characteristics quite often (e.g., Piccolo & Colquitt, 2006; Ehrhart, 2006; Evens & Ondrack, 1991; Arnold & House, 1980). Thus, this study combines these five core job characteristics into one additive index. The reliability for this scale in this study is 0.79.

Control Variables. Demographic variables were included in the study to control for their possible effects on JE. Previous studies have shown that age, gender, marital status, race, tenure, and number of children influence JE (Giosan, 2003; Mallol, 2002). Because there is essentially only one ethnic group of people in Vietnamese organizations, particularly in Hanoi (the Kinh people accounts for 86% of the population and this number is much larger in Hanoi, according to Vietnam Census, 2008), this study did not gather information about race. Therefore, age, gender, tenure, marital status, and number of children in family served as the control variables in this study.

RESULTS

The means, standard deviations and correlations of the study variables can be found in Table 1. JE is significantly and positively correlated with job characteristics and negatively correlated with turnover intention. These results are expected and consistent with prior research. The following sections will discuss the hypotheses test results.

Table1: Means, Standard Deviation, and Correlations

	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Tenure	7.99	7.59	--						
2. Age	34.4	8.72	.84**	--					
3. Number of Children	1.07	.89	.61**	.74**	--				
4. Gender	--	--	-.11*	-.21**	-.07	--			
5. Marital Status	--	--	.37**	-.49**	.69**	.00	--		
6. Job Characteristics	4.99	.88	.18**	.18**	.23**	-.03	-.13*	--	
7. Job Embeddedness	3.37	.65	.26**	.23**	.20**	-.00	-.12*	.54**	--
8. Turnover Intention	2.46	1.21	-.13*	-.18**	-.15**	.04	.07	-.46**	-.66**
** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).									
* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).									

Job Characteristics and Job Embeddedness

Hypothesis 1 proposes that job characteristics are positively related to JE. To test this hypothesis, a two-step regression model is used. First, the control variables (tenure, age, number of children, gender, and marital status) are regressed on JE. The results from Table 2 show that in this first step, only tenure is positively and significantly related to JE ($\beta = .215$, $p < .05$). Second, job characteristics are regressed on JE. Results from Step 2 in Table 2 show that Hypothesis 1 is supported ($\beta = .522$, $p < .01$). Thus, job characteristics are significantly and positively related to JE.

Table 2: Regression Results with JE as the Dependent Variable

Steps	Dependent Variable: JE	
	Step 1	Step 2
<i>Step 1: Control Variables:</i>		
Tenure	.215*	.152
Age	.024	.072
Number of Children	.068	.064
Gender	.038	.048
Marital Status	.027	.065
<i>Step 2:</i>		
Job Characteristics		.522**
Overall F	4.41**	107.35**
R-Square	.073	.329
Adjusted R-Square	.056	.315
R-Square change	.073**	.256**

Standardized β coefficients used; $n = 292$; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$

Job Embeddedness and Turnover Intention

Hypothesis 2 proposes that JE is negatively related to turnover intention. A three-step regression model is used to test this hypothesis. First, the control variables are regressed on turnover intention in Step 1. The results in Table 3 show that no control variable is significantly related to intention to quit. Second, job characteristics are entered in Step 2. The result in this step shows that job characteristics are significantly and negatively related to turnover intention ($\beta = -.451$, $p < .01$). Third, JE is entered in Step 3. Result shows that JE is negatively and significantly related to intention to quit after controlling for the demographic variables and job characteristics ($\beta = -.612$, $p < .01$). Thus, Hypothesis 2 is supported.

Mediation Effect of Job Embeddedness

Hypothesis 3 proposes that JE mediates the relationship between job characteristics and turnover intention. In order to test this mediating hypothesis, the four-step process proposed by Baron and Kenny (1986) and Kenny, Kashy, and Bolger (1998) were used. First, the independent variable (job characteristics) must exhibit a

significant relationship with the dependent variable (turnover intention). As showed in the previous section (Step 2 in Table 3), job characteristics do show a significant relationship with turnover intention, thus meeting the first condition of mediation.

Table 3: Regression Results with Turnover Intention as the Dependent Variable

Steps	Dependent Variable: Intention to Quit		
	Step 1	Step 2	Step 3
<i>Step 1: Control Variables:</i>			
Tenure	.067	.121	.214**
Age	-.185	-.226	-.182
Number of Children	-.109	.006	-.034
Gender	.005	-.004	.025
Marital Status	-.063	-.043	-.041
<i>Step 2:</i>			
Job Characteristics		-.451**	-.132*
<i>Step 3:</i>			
Job Embeddedness			-.612**
Overall F	2.170	69.712**	135.265**
R-Square	.037	.228	.480
Adjusted R-Square	.020	.212	.467
R-Square change	.037	.191**	.252**

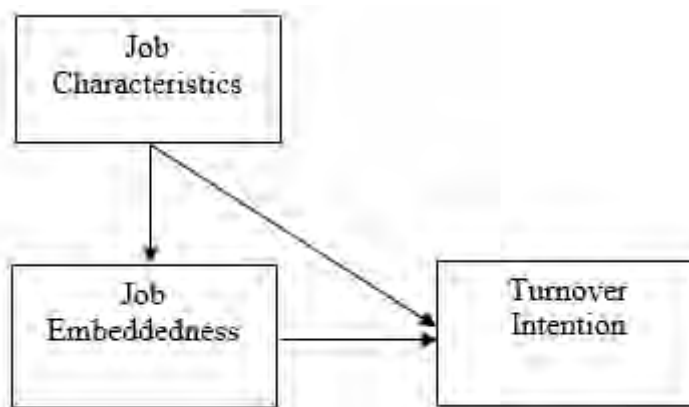
Standardized β coefficients used; $n = 292$; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$

Second, the independent variable (job characteristics) must be significantly related to the mediator (JE). As showed above, job characteristics are significantly related JE (Hypothesis 1). Thus, this meets the second condition of mediation.

Third, the mediating variable (JE) must show a significant relationship with the dependent variable (turnover intention). Again, as demonstrated in the previous section, JE is significantly related to intention to quit (Hypothesis 2). Therefore, the third condition of mediation is met.

Fourth, the relationship between the independent variables (job characteristics) and the dependent variable (turnover intention) must be significantly weaker or non-significant when the mediator (JE) is included. To check this fourth condition, the significant levels of the relationship between job characteristics and turnover intention from Step 2 and Step 3 in Table 3 are examined. The results show that although job characteristics are still significantly related to turnover intention after JE is included (Step 3 in Table 3), the significant level is reduced. In this case, the Sobel (1982) test can be used to determine whether or not the relationship between job characteristics and turnover intention has significantly decreased. The result of a Sobel test indicates a significantly weaker relationship when JE is added to the model ($Z = 7.83$; $p < .01$). Thus, JE mediates the relationship between job characteristics and turnover intention, as predicted in Hypothesis 3. However, because the relationship between job characteristics and turnover intention is still significant after including JE, this relationship is only partially, not fully, mediated by JE. The tested theoretical framework is showed in Figure 2.

Figure 2: Tested Theoretical Framework



DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study was to examine the relationships among job characteristics, JE, and turnover intention. Specifically, this study examined the direct relationships between job characteristics and JE and between JE and turnover intention. This study also investigated the mediation effect of JE on the relationship between job characteristics and turnover intention. These relationships were tested by a sample collected from a company in Vietnam.

Hypothesis 1 proposed that job characteristics (skill variety, task identity, task significance, autonomy, and feedback) are positively related to JE. The empirical results from this study supported this hypothesis. This means that if an employee perceives the job characteristics as favorable (such as high autonomy and significance), then s/he will be more embedded into the job. There are three possible reasons for this relationship. First, employees could feel a better fit with their jobs if they perceive the job characteristics are favorable (Ehrhart, 2006). Second, job characteristics create intrinsic motivation, which makes employees more involved and engaged in their jobs (Fried & Ferris, 1987; Hackman & Oldham, 1980). Last, because favorable job characteristics represent losses and sacrifice for employees if they quit, employees will be more likely to stay on their jobs.

Hypothesis 2, which proposed that JE is negatively related to intention to quit, was supported. The more embedded employees are in their jobs, the less likely they are to quit. This could be because of the connections employees have with other colleagues in the organization (links), and/or because of the compatibility employees perceive with their jobs and organization (fit), and/or because of the benefits employees have to give up if quitting (sacrifice), which enmesh employees into their jobs and keep them from leaving the organization. This finding is consistent with prior research in which JE was found to be negatively related to turnover intention (e.g., Mitchell et al., 2001; Besich, 2005). The result of this study, therefore, revalidates the important role of JE in influencing employee voluntary turnover in a country and culture other than the United States.

This study also found that JE partially mediates the relationship between job characteristics and turnover intention (Hypothesis 3). This means that job characteristics do not only directly but also indirectly influence employee intention to quit via the mediation effect of JE. Consistent with prior research (e.g., Fried & Ferris, 1987) on the direct and negative relationship between job characteristics and turnover intention, it is also important that job characteristics help employees embed into their jobs and therefore keep them from leaving the organization.

The findings of this study make several important contributions to the areas of JE and turnover that are relevant for both academic researchers and managerial practitioners. For academicians, the results of this research enhance the understanding of the antecedents of JE. By adding job characteristics as an antecedent of JE, this study expands the research by Giosan (2003) which mainly focused on personal characteristics (demography and personality) that impact JE. Thus, job factors also play an important role in the development of JE.

Another contribution of the current study is that it investigated the JE construct in a different culture and context other than in the U.S. Adding to a very limited number of previous studies conducted outside of the US (e.g., Ramesh, 2007; Tanova & Holtom, 2008), this study again validates the importance of JE as a major determinant of employee turnover intention from a cross-cultural perspective. This study, therefore, provides some support for the generalizability of the JE construct across different cultures.

For practitioners, this research has two important implications. First, because JE is a major determinant of employee intention to quit, the more employees embed into their jobs, the less likely they are to leave the organization. Thus, managers need to focus on factors that will most effectively enhance JE. These factors should strengthen the links employees have with others in the organization, enhance their fit with their jobs and the organization, and represent greater sacrifice or losses for employees if they quit. By finding and focusing on these factors, managers can increase the likelihood that their valuable employees will stay longer with the organization.

Second, job characteristics were found to directly influence JE and turnover intention. Job characteristics also indirectly influence turnover intention via the mediation effect of JE. This is a very important finding. Employees will be more embedded into their jobs if they perceive that their job characteristics, including skill variety, task identity, task significance, autonomy, and feedback, are favorable. Managers, therefore, need to focus on these aspects when designing jobs if they are to embed employees more into their jobs and keep them from leaving the organization. For example, job rotation can help employees obtain more skills, while job enrichment can enhance both task significance and autonomy for employees. Providing ongoing feedback to employees can also be important in helping them know how well they are doing. By providing these, managers would increase the likelihood that employees are more embedded into their jobs and less likely to leave the organization.

As does any empirical research, this study has certain limitations. The design of the study could contribute to some of these limitations. Because the study was cross-sectional in that it asked participants to complete a questionnaire at one point in time, it is impossible to draw conclusions about causal relationships. In addition, because only a single organization was involved, the findings could be limited to the current sample, rather than generalizable. Furthermore, because the study utilized a questionnaire with self-reported answers, it is solely dependent on the honesty of the individual respondents in providing their information. Future research,

therefore, should use longitudinal designs to better predict causal relationships among variables. Future research should also replicate this study by using different samples, from different organizations, in different cultures, in order to increase the generalizability of the findings.

Another limitation of this study is that it examined the effects of job characteristics on the overall JE, not on the separate dimensions (links, fit, and sacrifice) of JE. Because of this, it is not possible to assess how job characteristics influence each dimension of JE. Future research, therefore, should investigate the impacts on each dimension of JE.

In conclusion, this study fills in two important gaps in the JE research. First, the study provides an understanding and explanation for the relationships among job characteristics, JE, and employee intention to quit. Specifically, job characteristics were found to play a significant role in influencing JE. Job characteristics also influence turnover intention directly and indirectly via the mediation effect of JE. Second, conducted outside the United States, this study validates the importance of JE construct in voluntary turnover research across cultures. The framework and the findings of this study, therefore, guide and enhance future research as well as help practitioners find ways and conditions to retain valuable employees.

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