

Employee Job Embeddedness: Why People Stay

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Abstract

The purpose of the qualitative, phenomenological study was to explore the perceptions and lived experiences of human resource (HR) practitioners to understand their decisions to stay with an organization through employee job embeddedness. Eighteen HR practitioners at a government organization supporting the community as public civil servants were interviewed. Findings from the analysis of the interview responses revealed that employees believed they were valued by their organization when considering factors such as career advancement, good leadership, and job security which resulted in increases in retention. By contrast, employees believed they were devalued by their organization when they perceived a lack of training and mentoring, knowledgeable leadership, and communication. These findings may provide business leaders with viable information to predict employee turnover and to better understand why people stay in their current positions, thereby, reducing costs associated with employee turnover.

INTRODUCTION

Throughout history, reducing employee turnover remained high on the agenda of leaders of every industry across the nation because of the burdensome costs associated with it (North, Rasmussen, Hughes, & Finlayson, 2005). Although numerous studies have been conducted on employee turnover (why people leave), according to some scholars, limited amount of literature addresses employee job embeddedness (why people stay) (Kilburn & Kilburn, 2008; Zhao & Liu, 2010). Employee job embeddedness may be defined as employees who become part of a social web that connects them to an organization or social network, ultimately reducing turnover costs (Mitchell, Holtom, Lee, Sablinski, & Ezrez, 2001; Lee & Mitchell, 1994).

Job embeddedness is determined through meeting the needs and well-being of individuals, comprising links, fit, and sacrifices (Mitchell et al., 2001). Links connect people to groups and teams; fit seeks to delineate through the perspectives of individuals how they best fit into the job, community, and organization; and, sacrifices, lend itself to changes or transitions of a job (Mitchell et al., 2001). Given the importance of this issue, employee job embeddedness theory warranted more attention (Crossley, Bennett, Jex, & Burnfield, 2007; Holtom & Inderrienden, 2006). Within that context, several theoretical schools of thought have been explored in examining the needs and well-being of individuals from broader constructs to include: (a) employee turnover and employee job embeddedness; (b) recruitment, retention, and generational differences; (c) human relations; and (d) leadership styles.

Employee Turnover and Employee Job Embeddedness

Theories on employee turnover evolved over the last 60 years through traditional and nontraditional frameworks. The traditional theoretical framework on employee turnover includes attitudinal models, such as March and Simon's (1958) notion of perceived desirability or job satisfaction, in contrast with perceived ease or dissatisfaction (Felps, Mitchell, Hekman, Lee, Holtom, & Harman, 2009; Holtom & Inderrienden, 2006). Many traditional attitudinal theories on turnover emerged throughout the 1980s and 1990s with new ideas on job satisfaction, commitment, and alternative job search (Felps et al., 2009). Nontraditional theory, however, countered the traditional attitudinal

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constructs, indicating the failure of this approach in identifying and addressing the variances in turnover characteristics (Felps et al., 2009; Joseph, Ng, Koh, & Ang, 2007).

To establish this point of view, in the 1990s and forward, nontraditional theorists evolved, suggesting attitudinal and job search theories omitted to include organizational attachment and individual differences amongst employees as critical factors in turnover (Barrick & Mount, 1996; Hulin, 1991). The views of nontraditionalists on employee turnover, such as Lee and Mitchell, (1994) who developed a model on unfolding turnover, marked major breakthroughs in the body of literature on this phenomenon. Subsequent studies attest to unfolding turnover theory as providing a phenomenal shift in creating new theories that help understanding employee turnover better (Bergiel, Nguyen, Clenney, & Taylor, 2009; Firmand, 2010; Holtom & Inderrienden, 2006; Kidwell McGown, 2005).

Mitchell et al. (2001) further contributed to this school of thought by framing the construct of job embeddedness. Mitchell et al. indicated the job embeddedness theory was inspired from Lewin's (1951) study on figures and field theory, depicting embeddedness as a web in a two-dimensional framework. Based on this model, in the context of job embeddedness, figures depict psychological images embedded in the background of individuals; therefore, they became attached to the organization and attempting to separate them would be difficult. Moreover, the field theory provides the perceptions of people connected to every space in their lives, whether small, large, near, or far.

Mitchell et al. (2001) concluded that people who felt attached to an organization became embedded into the environment or its social web. From this stance, the authors crystallized theory around job embeddedness with focus on staying through their premise on links, fit and sacrifices. Extant research suggested that exploring theories on job embeddedness opens a variety of avenues to develop strategies that may motivate employees to stay with an organization; thus, significantly widening the scope and depth of the existing literature (Sekiguchi, Burton, & Sablynski, 2008; Zhao & Liu, 2010).

Human Relations Theory

Throughout history human relations has been a factor in everyday life even dating back to the late Middle Ages (1300-1500) to an epoch of master crafts people and their apprentices (Lossey, 1998). In the 18th and 19th centuries, the Industrial Revolution changed the world both socioeconomically and culturally, insofar as apprentice rights and remuneration was concerned (LaRue, Childs, & Larson, 2006). The Great Depression of the 1920s throughout the 1940s brought the Industrial Revolution boom to a standstill. During this period, however, the evolution of the human relations movement as well as many new theories emerged (Losey, 1998). Theoretical insights into human relations positioned organizations to view employees as human beings with cares and needs, rather than as property or machines (LaRue et al., 2006).

The most significant were Frederick Winslow Taylor's Scientific Management or top-down approach (Parker & Ritson, 2005) and Elton Mayo's, the father of the human relations movement, bottom-up approach (Scott & Davis, 2007). Taylor sought to cure lags in productivity with a scientific method or top-down approach, stemming from three factors: (a) it did not allow the workers to provide their opinions based on their expertise, (b) it did not value workers' merit or reward job performance, and (c) it supported the view that thoughts only of the management counted (Hoopes, 2003). Contrary to Taylor's top-down approach, Elton Mayo ignited a new phenomenon, the bottom-up approach, in an attempt to improve working relationships between employers and employees (Parker & Ritson, 2005; Scott & Davis, 2007; Tidd, Bessant, & Pavitt, 2005). Elton Mayo conducted seminal studies on work groups and organizational behavior in the Hawthorne studies, leaving a lasting mark on human relations and sociology (Tidd et al., 2005).

Recruitment, Retention, and Generational Differences

Recruitment and retention of a diversified workforce along with a grounded awareness of generational classes in the workforce provided a variety of angles to explore ways in which individuals might choose to stay with an organization (Karsan, 2007; Somaya & Williamson, 2008). Dating back to the early 1900s, companies' recruitment and retention efforts aimed to attract a diversified workforce with the focus on professional proficiency and capabilities (Meyer & Allen, 1997). Consequently, during that period, a widening acceptance of people of all classes into the workforce became evident, including the acceptance of generational classes, such as Baby Boomers (Boomers), Generation X, and Generation Y (or the Millennials) (Howe & Strauss, 1997; Meyer & Allen, 1997; Somaya & Williamson, 2008; Westerman & Yamamura, 2007).

Gesell (2010) reported that the Boomers (born 1946-1961) represented 50% of a company's workforce with Generation X (born 1962-1979), contributing by 39%, and the remaining 11% taken by Millennials (born after 1980). According to Francis-Smith (2004), Generation Y becomes frustrated with older generations whom they perceive to be technically incompetent or too uptight. Generation X values a balance of job and leisure time, demands clear information of practical value, and does not take well to micromanaging (Eisner, 2005).

The Boomers may be viewed as workaholics and are usually willing to work long hours; thus, they perceive desire for private life as a sign of laziness and lack of commitment (Cruz, 2007; Eisner, 2005). Thus, improved awareness

of generational traits as they pertain to recruitment and retention of a diversified workforce is of paramount importance for organizations aiming to balance the three generational classes and their differences.

Leadership and Leadership Styles

Leadership and associated styles remain as one of the major business discussion topics (Brooks , Blewett, Radcliffe, Tompkins, Lingenfelter, & Pyun, 2007; Dhiman, 2007; Lester, 2007; Shrader, 2007). Theories on trait leadership imply that leaders are born possessing pre-determined inner qualities and leadership skills that others lack (Borg & Tupes, 1958; Zaccaro, 2007). Other theorists, Northouse (2010), Bennett (2009), and Karsten, Keulen, Kroeze, and Peters (2009) rejected the trait approach, indicating that in reality, leaders are not born, but grow by developing their behavior over time. For example, although the Ohio state studies originated with trait-based theory, they later shifted their approach toward the concept of behavioral patterns (Northouse, 2010; Weissenberg & Kavanagh, 1972).

The Ohio state studies initiated the paradigm shift from the view that leaders are born to that with the focus on leader behaviors that influence people by developing and enhancing his or her style of leadership. Empirical evidence suggested that the leadership styles have significant influence on the behavior of followers (Bennett, 2009; Karsten et al., 2009). The research implied that no single ideal way to lead exists, which indicates that leaders develop a variety of leadership styles based on their personality and circumstances (Karsten et al., 2009). With leadership styles in the forefront of the theoretical framework, new theories on transformational and transactional leadership styles benchmarked the development of new theories (Arons, 2006; Brocato & Gold, 2010; Mannheim & Halamish, 2008). Other theories included situational and contingency leadership, servant and authentic leadership, and autocratic and directive leadership, to name a few (Abbasi, Hollman, & Hayes., 2008; Cashman, 2008; Greenleaf, 2002; Lau, Liu, & Fu, 2007; Vroom & Jago, 2007).

Empirical evidence suggested that high employee turnover is one of the underlying causes to extreme corporate costs and severe disruptions in customer services to companies and organizations (Posthuma, Joplin, & Maerta, 2005; Von Hagel, 2010). As a result, this problem may be diminished by effectively exploring employee job embeddedness. Thus, this qualitative phenomenological study was designed to use semi-structured interviews to explore the lived experiences and perceptions of 18 individuals at a mid-sized government agency, to include advance the extant literature. Van Kaam's modified method of Moustakas' (1994) design enabled exploration of themes or patterns emerging from the interviews.

Qualitative Methodology

According to Creswell (2007) and Neuman (2007), qualitative research is used to analyze information from personal views of participants, conveyed in words or images, to interpret meaning and relate them to themes or factors. Creswell (2007) and Neuman (2007) further identified three goals in research: exploratory, descriptive, or explanatory. The first goal, exploratory, matched the qualitative method (Creswell, 2007; Neuman, 2007). The exploratory goal formulates questions to build on future research and aims to provide definitive direction for the study. Moreover, the exploratory research method leaves room for creativity, openness, and flexibility as well as leaves room to investigate all types of information (Neuman, 2007).

Neither the quantitative nor the mixed research methods were suitable for this study, as these could not provide suitable means for exploring and understanding a central phenomenon (Creswell, 2007; Neuman, 2007). Quantitative methods focus on analyzing numbers or statistical data, independent variables, dependent variables, and hypotheses, aligning to a large population of participants (Creswell, 2007; Neuman, 2007; Simon, 2006). Mixed research methods consists of both qualitative and quantitative methods and was not conducive for this study, which was solely qualitative (Creswell, 2007; Neuman, 2007).

Although several research designs were under consideration for this study, including ethnography, grounded theory, and heuristic phenomenology, phenomenological research was deemed most appropriate to answer the question revolving around the essence of the lived experiences of individuals and groups (Moustakas, 1994; Creswell, 2007; Garza, 2007; Neuman, 2007; Patton, 2002; Richards & Morse, 2007). Further, it was determined that experiential phenomenology was the most appropriate research design. The experiential phenomenology design appropriately portrayed the essence of the lived experiences from the participants' perspectives and perceptions (Moustakas, 1994).

METHOD

Participants

The size of the population for this qualitative phenomenological study was carefully considered aligned with Patton's terminology on size. Although Polkinghorne (2005) recommended a sample size of 5 to 25 participants, Patton (2002) postulated that no specific rules apply for a sample size. According to Patton, "Sample size depends on what you want to know, the purpose of the inquiry, what's at stake, what will be useful, what will have credibility, and what can be done with available time and resources" (p. 244).

Patton (2002) attested phenomenological research is used to investigate participants' lived experiences and perceptions of particular phenomena, which requires a thorough attention of the researcher, and even though the sample is small, the credibility of the sampling proved solvent. Patton explained that participants who provided rich and in-depth experiences added credibility to the study. Thus, for this study, 18 human resource practitioners were identified who have been employed in a mid-sized government agency, for a minimum of 3 years. Of the 18 participants, 13 were females and 5 were males (see Table 1).

Table 1

Demographic Data of Sample

<i>Participant</i>	<i>Gender</i>	<i>Grade Level</i>	<i>Experience (years)</i>	<i>College Level</i>
P1	Female	GS-14	25	Master's Degree
P2	Female	GS-12	26	Master's Degree
P3	Female	GS-11	5	Bachelor's Degree
P4	Female	GS-9	3	Master's Degree
P5	Female	GS-12	20	None
P6	Female	GS-13	14	None
P7	Female	GS-13	23	None
P8	Female	GS-12	6	Bachelor's Degree
P9	Male	GS-12	11	Master's Degree
P10	Male	GS-14	7	Bachelor's Degree
P11	Female	GS-14	14	Bachelor's Degree
P12	Male	GS-15	29	Master's Degree
P13	Male	GS-12	5	Master's Degree
P14	Female	GS-14	30	None
P15	Male	GS-14	15	Master's Degree
P16	Female	GS-15	30	Master's Degree
P17	Female	GS-12	12	None
P18	Female	GS-14	25	Bachelor's Degree

Note. General Schedule (GS) = position type for federal civilian employees and Grade Level = pay grade from GS-1 (lowest) to GS-15 (highest).

Procedures

Following university IRB approval, the participants who volunteered for the study had at least three years or more employment with the government agency and were current human resource practitioners. Permission to use the government facility was requested in advance as well as permission to recruit volunteers to participate in the research. The facility was selected because of its mid-size (400 employees) and location.

Using the company e-mail directory, an invitation letter was e-mailed to 30 employees who met the three-year employment criteria and included the following information: the purpose of the study, why it was important, whom the information was for, how it would be used, how the responses will be handled, and the risks and benefits for the participant. The participants were advised they could leave the interview at any time during the session. Eighteen agreed to participate.

Seven interviews were conducted via telephone due to their personal preference, and the other 11 were face-to-face. Participants' names were coded for confidentiality (see Table 1). The participants of the study worked at a mid-sized government agency as human resource practitioners where the in-person interviews took place. The interviews lasted between 20 and 50 minutes as common themes emerged and the duration of the data collection process was four months.

Interview Guide

The central question of this qualitative phenomenological study was as follows: How do human resource practitioners perceive and describe their experiences of employee job embeddedness (why they stay with the organization)? Creswell (2007) recommended that open-ended questions remain general and guide the research in the manner that the researcher expects each participant to answer as the study takes place. Thus, six open-ended questions were used to obtain a better understanding of the problem to explore the central question of the study. The six primary questions included: What do human resource practitioners do? How long have you worked for your current organization? What made you stay with the organization up to this point? What would you like to see changed or improved in the workplace? Is there anything that would make you leave? Is there anything else you want to say or any questions?

Data Reliability and Analysis

Reliability in qualitative research implies dependability or consistency (Neuman, 2007). Golafshani (2003) commented that in qualitative research, both reliability and validity are conceptualized as trustworthiness, rigor, and quality. Interviewing is the best data collection method for phenomenological designs, as it increases the likelihood of capturing the lived experiences of the study participants (Moustakas, 1994; Patton, 2002). According to Patton (2002), researchers are the instruments in qualitative studies; therefore, they are important parts of increasing validity in a study.

The primary researcher for this study possesses more than 20 years' experience as a human resource practitioner. To ensure the study was reliable, the data collection process was consistent across all study participants, thus yielding comparable descriptions of the lived experiences. The strength and reliability of phenomenology is the ability to obtain the thick, rich descriptions of the phenomenon under study (Patton, 2002). Phenomenological analysis "seeks to grasp and elucidate the meaning, structure, and essence of lived experiences of a phenomenon for a person or group of people" (Patton, 2002, p. 482). To increase the validity of the study, the researcher attempted to adhere to Epoche, where the researcher abstains from judgment and any preconceived notions of the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). The Epoche is not a fixed step; according to Patton (2002), "The process of Epoche epitomizes the data-based, evidence, and empirical . . . research orientation of phenomenology" (p. 485). Epoche, therefore, must be perceived as an ongoing process.

Phenomenological analysis is not only a description of the phenomenon, but also an "interpretive process" (Creswell, 2007, p. 253). According to van Manen (1990), themes are not things, but "a form of capturing the phenomenon one tries to understand" (p. 87). Thus, the data analysis phase was based on Moustakas' (1994) seven-step modified van Kaam process. The modified van Kaam method, analogous to the process of distillation, involves a hierarchical treatment of the interview data. It is used in conjunction with the NVivo8[®] software program, which aids in the organization and categorization of the data, which is discussed in further detail below.

The seven steps of the modified van Kaam (Moustakas, 1994) method include the following: horizontalization, reduction and elimination, clustering and thematizing, final identification of invariant constituents, individual textural description, individual structural description, and composite textural-structural description. The application of NVivo8[®] software assisted with analyzing the data through creating nodes, coding data, and running queries (i.e., word and text searches). The interview questions, along with the digitally recorded interviews, were used as the primary sources for grouping and analyzing the transcribed research data using NVivo8[®] software. For example, in using the software, the *sources* represented participants' responses, and the *references* accounted for the number of times the themes were mentioned during the interviews. The meanings and essences of the experiences shared by the interviewees were formalized, allowing conclusions to be drawn and finally answering the research questions.

RESULTS

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study, using Moustakas' (1994) modified van Kaam method, was to understand how 18 human resource practitioners attached to an organizational web through their perceptions and lived experiences. This task was undertaken through use of semi-structured interviews to develop an overall analysis of each interview question with participants' statements and overall percentages. As evidenced from the findings of the literature review, the higher an individual is embedded in the social web or net, the more likely the person binds to both the job and the organization; whereas, the lower an individual is embedded, the more likely the person shows interest in leaving (Mitchell, Holtom, Lee, Sablinski, & Ezrez, 2001). Thus, comparisons of the five core themes with the 17 invariant constituents (Table 2) were linked to job embeddedness (links, fit, and sacrifices) from the organization domain (Table 3) using Holtom, Mitchell and Lee's (2006) descriptions of the terms.

First, fit-organization reflects the compatibility with the organization or comfort perceived by an employee. The values of individuals, their career targets, and career plans in the future ought to fit with the current job requirements, and even the mainstream culture of the enterprise (such as knowledge, skill, and competence). Second, links-organization includes the formal and informal links between employees and others or the group within the organization. Third, sacrifice-organization refers to the perceived material profits and psychologically anticipated profits lost due to personal turnover. For example, leaving an organization might mean loss of individuals (e.g., loss of colleagues, a project, or a special treatment).

Table 2
Final Emergent Themes

Core Themes for Research Questions	Emergent Invariant Themes	Percentage of Total Participants
1. HR Practitioners' Leading Roles	Recruitment, staffing, classification Leaders, advisors, and consultants Benefits and pay	83% 50% 22%
2. HR Practitioners Tenure in Federal Government	21 to 30 years 15 to 20 years 10 to 14 years 3 to 9 years	39% 11% 22% 28%
3. Why People Stay	Career advancement Value HR work Job security Job location Good leadership	72% 56% 22% 22% 22%
4. Improvements to Reduce Turnover	Training and mentoring programs Knowledgeable HR leadership	61% 28%
5. Perceptions Precipitating Leaving	Communication No thoughts of leaving Some thoughts of leaving: - Seek a more family friendly organization - Job location closer to home - Not enough leadership in government - Lack of respect for HR as a whole - Hiring shortages	22% 78% 35% 6% 11% 6% 6%

Table 3
HR Practitioners' Job Embeddedness to Fit, Links, and Sacrifice

Theme	Fit-Organization	Links-Organization	Sacrifice-Organization
1. HR practitioners' leading roles (High embeddedness)	- Recruitment, staffing, and classification - Leaders, managers, and advisors - Benefits and pay	- Recruitment, staffing, and classification - Leaders, managers, and advisors - Benefits and pay	
2. HR practitioners' tenure in federal government (High embeddedness)			- Years employed by organization
3. Why people stay (High embeddedness)	- Career advancement - Value HR work	- Good leadership	- Job security - Location
4. Improvements to reduce turnover (Low embeddedness)	Training and mentoring	Training and mentoring Knowledgeable leadership Communication	Training and mentoring Knowledgeable leadership Communication
5. Perceptions precipitating leaving (High and low embeddedness)	- No thoughts of leaving	- No thoughts of leaving - Some thoughts of leaving: - Not enough leadership - Lack of respect - Seeking a more family friendly location	- No thoughts of leaving - Some thoughts of leaving: - Job location - Hiring shortages

Theme One: HR Practitioners' Leading Role

This theme and invariant constituents linked to fit-organization and links-organization. The results provided the participants' perceptions of their roles and responsibilities in their professions as human resource (HR) practitioners included 83% recruitment, staffing, and classification, 50% consulting, and 22% benefits and pay. According to Mitchell, Holtom, Lee, Sablinski, and Ezrez, (2001), these factors from the sampling are considered as valid predictors of HR employees' perceptions regarding their roles in an organization, reflecting compatibility with the organization or perceived comfort both formally and informally.

HR practitioners work with management, employees, and various groups; thus, the participants' responses reflect high degrees of embeddedness in both categories (see Table 3). Participant 10 said, "We pretty much- HR practitioners do a lot of things from staff and classification, putting out vacancy announcements, [and] processing actions." Participant 11 stated, "And my career consists of determining if applicants are qualified for those jobs and all the processes that [are] involved in the hiring and retention and the eventual separation of those employees."

Theme Two: HR Practitioners' Tenure in Federal Government

This theme aligns with sacrifices-organization in that employees who have longevity in an organization may consider what they may have to forfeit or give up should they leave (Halbesleben & Wheeler, 2008; Mitchell et al., 2001). The findings indicated that 39% of the participants had worked with the organization from 21 to 30 years, 11% from 15 to 20 years, 22% from 10 to 14 years, and 28% had been employed with the agency for three to nine years. Moreover, tenure with an organization predicts high embeddedness in an organization, and for this category all of the responses (between 3 and 30 years of employment) demonstrate degrees of high embeddedness (Mitchell et al., 2001). Participant 8 stated, "I've been in the Federal Government with HHS for five years." "Worked for HHS for, oh, about 15 years," were the words of Participant 15.

Theme Three: Why People Stay.

The findings from the five top invariant constituents for this theme determined how the sampling attached to the organizational social net. The first two invariant constituents, career advancement (72%) and value of HR work (56%), align with fit-organization; whereas, the invariant themes, job security, and location (32%) align with sacrifices-organization, and similarly, good leadership (22%) aligns with links-organization. The concept of career orientation is defined as an individualized view of a person's career that provides a path to act, such as charting a path to make career selections (Briscoe & Hall, 2006). The other invariant constituents included job security, job location, and good leadership as important factors, linking the participants' attachment to the social web of the organization. Regarding good leadership, one participant expressed how personally caring about the supervisor influenced the individual's decision to remain in the organization (P16).

Participant 5 shared during the interview, "Well, for one thing, I liked what I was doing. I very much enjoyed what I was doing working in human resources - something I never did before." Participant 17 expressed, "I love the services the agency provides . . . I have been familiar with HHS for over 20 years . . . I previously worked as a contractor."

Theme Four: Improvements to Reduce Turnover

The HR practitioners specified three factors (training and mentoring programs, knowledgeable leadership, and communication) needing improvement in the organization. Based on Mitchell et al.'s (2001) premise on job embeddedness, all of the invariant constituents from this core theme demonstrate low embeddedness, because employees' needs in these areas are not adequately met based on their perceptions. Training and mentoring programs (61%) align with fit-organization and links-organization, whereas knowledgeable leadership (28%) and communication (22%) align with links-organization; thus, all of these factors result in low embeddedness, resulting in increased turnover (see Table 3). Participant 3 asserted, "What I see that needs to change is better training for management on how to relate to their staff." Similarly, Participant 4 stated, "Training. I would like to see more training...."

Theme Five: Perceptions Precipitating Leaving

In comparison to Mitchell et al.'s (2001) description of job embeddedness, this category includes both high and low levels of job embeddedness when compared to the participants' responses. Seventy-eight percent of the participants indicated they had no thoughts of leaving the organization; thus, this theme aligns across all three categories of job embeddedness, including fit-organization, links-organization, and sacrifices-organization, demonstrating high job embeddedness (see Table 3). Instead, 35% (an aggregate total) of the participants indicated they had given some thought to the idea of leaving; therefore, this category could align with links-organization and sacrifice-organization (low job embeddedness).

The participants articulated specific reasons around their thoughts of leaving, such as seeking a family friendly organization, a job location closer to home, comprehensive leadership, respect for HR's role, and hiring shortages. Participant 4 said, "No. There's nothing that I can think of possibly think of at this point in time." Participant 2 stated,

"I wouldn't leave my career as an HR specialist, but definitely, I could leave the organization and seek for a more family friendly agency."

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to use semi-structured interviews to explore the lived experiences and perceptions of 18 individuals at a mid-sized government agency, to further advance the extant literature. Van Kaam's modified method of Moustakas' (1994) design enabled exploration of themes or patterns emerging from the interviews. The results from the five core themes and 17 invariant constituents with respect to Mitchell et al.'s (2001) premise on links, fit, and sacrifices in the organizational domain highlighted areas of both low and high job embeddedness.

For this section, it is noted that theme two, *Tenure in Federal Government*, was merged with theme five, *Perceptions Precipitating Leaving*. The guiding question for the research was: How do human resource practitioners perceive and describe their experiences of employee job embeddedness (why they stay with the organization)? As evidenced from the findings, the higher an individual is embedded in the social web or net, the more likely the person binds to both the job and the organization; whereas, the lower an individual is embedded, the more likely the person shows interest in leaving (Mitchell et al., 2001).

Theme One: HR Practitioners' Leading Role

According to multiple sources (e.g., Buyens & De Vos, Francis, 2006; 2001; Laabs, 2000; Ulrich, Brockbank, & Johnson, 2009), HR managers are becoming crucial for ensuring the success of the company's business strategies. However, other research has shown that HR professionals lack the business knowledge, expertise, or mental capacity to move companies forward as leaders (Fulford & Enz, 1995; Yeung, Woolcock, & Sullivan, 1996). From the responses of the sampling of HR practitioners, 83% saw their roles as recruitment, staffing, and classification. Half saw their roles as leaders, advisors, and consultants.

Thus, these employees reflected high degrees of employee job embeddedness in alignment with Mitchell et al.'s (2001) premise of job embeddedness (see Table 3). According to Wheeler et al. (2010), the organizational social web consisting of fit, links, and sacrifices may be applied to human resources management (HRM) in a practical manner: (a) HRM functions, representing employees who *fit* in that organization, transmit fit-related data through the duration of recruitment, hiring, socialization, and training; thus, creating *psychological contracts* that increase retention; (b) HRM functions act as links, in that they promote reliance on teams, act as mediators between different functions, and act in timely manner to ensure that employee concerns are addressed; and (c) HRM functions are also perceived as a means to monitor and balance perceived *sacrifices*, so the organization may use talent compensation packages to draw, motivate, and retain employees upon recruitment, based on selection, and performance ratings. The research pinpoints HRM as unequivocally providing a positive relationship between an organization and the web of job embeddedness inclusive of retention of individuals.

Theme Three: Why People Stay

Table 3 depicts high levels of job embeddedness in the participants' responses comprised of five factors (i.e., career advancement, value HR work, good leadership, and job security and location). From the first factor, career advancement, little empirical research exists concerning the relationship between HR practitioners and career advancement through job embeddedness. However, in the present study 13 HR practitioners (72%) viewed career advancement as key to retention with the organization (see Table 2). Kraimer, Shaffer, and Bolino (2009) investigated the relationship between expatriate retention and career advancement using a sampling of 84 expatriates. The results from the sampling conveyed similarities with high levels of job embeddedness, ultimately resulting in increases in retention (Kraimer et al., 2009; Mitchell et al., 2001).

Conversely, Mobley, Griffeth, Hand, and Meglino (1979) contended employees who perceive career growth opportunities as unsatisfactory typically measure the expected utility of a job search and the costs associated with quitting before deciding whether to quit or stay. From the second factor, 57% of the research sampling indicated they valued HR work, which may be associated to the role of mission attachment insofar that the participants (72%) in this study indicated career advancement as the primary choice for why they stay. The concept of mission attachment also might create a link to monitor low employee job embeddedness through moderating dissatisfaction in pay or negative changes in career advancement for employees (Holtom, Mitchell, & Lee, 2006; Kim & Lee, 2007).

Good leadership, the third factor, provided another variable to explore in relation to why people stay with the organization as identified by the participants (22%) in the research. P4 stated the management was respectful and willing to meet and accommodate the needs of the staff. P16 stated that the first-line supervisor cared about employees. This was in contrast with Research Question 4 in which participants identified the need for knowledgeable HR leadership (28%) and better communication (22%) as recommended changes or improvements in an organization. There is little empirical support to confirm these findings; however, 22% described behaviors of leaders in the organization that typified effective leadership qualities (high embeddedness).

In contrast, an aggregate of 50% (knowledgeable leadership (28%) and better communication (22%)) described some of their leaders as possessing ineffective leadership behaviors (low embeddedness). Job security was the fourth factor that 22% of the participants conveyed as a reason they stay. With limited empirical research matching job security to job embeddedness, Mannheim and Halamish (2008) suggested employees exhibiting insecurities regarding job security appear to become less embedded into the organizational web and more likely to leave the organization than those who have perceptions of job security in positive light, signifying a high level of embeddedness in which they stay. Although empirical evidence on the last factor, job location, is limited, 22% of the research sampling predicted high levels of job embeddedness in this category.

Theme Four: Improvements to Reduce Turnover

In response to the study's findings, the category, *improvements to reduce turnover*, aligns with low levels of employee job embeddedness (Mitchell et al., 2001). Studies have indicated employees consider training and mentoring programs as essential in helping develop their talent in the organization and strengthen their attachment to the organizational web (Kim & Lee, 2007; Dardar, Jusoh, & Rasli, 2012). Dardar, Jusoh, and Rasli (2012) reviewed contemporary literature to emphasize the link between employee training and turnover intentions as well as job satisfaction. In the present study, 61% the research sampling expressed low levels of job embeddedness, indicative of some potential detachment from the social web. Thus, although participants were in general unsatisfied with the level of training and mentorship received, other themes were more valued and overrode any efforts to leave due to this theme.

Theme Five: Perceptions Precipitating Leaving

Based on the study's findings (see Table 2), 78% of the participants indicated they had no thoughts or perceptions to leave the organization, indicating a high degree of job embeddedness (Mitchell, et al., 2001). The sampling results from theme two supports or echoes the results reported in, *HR Practitioners' Tenure in Federal Government*, that found 39% of the participants had worked with the organization from 21 to 30 years, 11% from 15 to 20 years, 22% from 10-14 years, and 28% had been employed with the agency for three to nine years, resembling high degrees of embeddedness (Mitchell et al., 2001) (see Table 3). In comparison with existing research Holtom, Mitchell, Lee, & Inderrienden (2005) and Holtom and Inderrienden (2006) provided studies indicating employees voluntarily leave organizations because of an unexpected or sudden jarring event, or shock, triggering a psychological decision, which leads to their decision to leave the organization. The concept first derived from Lee and Mitchell's (1994) unfolding turnover model, which described a shock as "a particular, jarring event that initiates the psychological analyses involved in quitting a job" (p. 51).

Conversely, in comparison with the sampling responses for this study on their perceptions precipitating leaving an organization, an aggregate total of 35% indicated some thoughts of leaving (low levels of job embeddedness), such as not enough leadership (6%), lack of respect (6%), seeking a more family friendly location (6%), job location (11%), and hiring shortages (6%). Thus, these factors could be construed as contributing to low levels of job embeddedness or a jarring event indicative of increases in turnover (Lee & Mitchell, 1994).

Limitations and Future Research

The findings of this study should be considered in light of its limitations. First, it lacks generalizability to a broader audience. Future research could consider how job embeddedness in other vocations besides HR is impacted by the themes that emerged from the present study. Data should be considered with caution given the qualitative methodology. Although qualitative research allows deeper, richer data to emerge, biases and interpretations exist which may have impacted the findings.

The unintended personal biases could have presented a degree of limitation, as during the interview sessions, any probing of the interview questions could have influenced the participants' responses. Because of the exploratory nature of the research, validity was limited to the captured data, creating difficulty in achieving conventional standards related to reliability and validity. The participants' population was predominantly women; thus, it is unknown if including more men in future studies of this kind would result in different data or findings. Seven interviews were conducted via telephone, and the other 11 were in-person; thus, it is unknown if the results would be different had all of the interviews been conducted in the same format. The research results include a comparison between job embeddedness through fit-organization, links-organization, and sacrifices-organization, which is an approach not previously adopted in similar studies.

Although this approach provides uniqueness, it does not provide the degree of relationships, if any, between these factors and job embeddedness. There was no disconfirming evidence, counter examples, or viable alternative interpretations to consider from reviewing literature. Therefore, future studies should focus on job embeddedness from a qualitative phenomenological perspective (Bergiel, Nguyen, Clenney, & Taylor, 2009; Wheeler et al., 2010). For example, the use of the HR population expanded the existing research base and increased the validity of the study on job embeddedness from the standpoint of using it as a mechanism to monitor retention (Creswell, 2007; Neuman, 2007).

CONCLUSION

The notion of employee job embeddedness provided the cornerstone for exploring theories on meeting individuals' needs to counter employees' intentions to leave an organization (Kilburn & Kilburn, 2008; Sekiguchi, Burton, & Sablinski, 2008; Zhao & Liu, 2010). Leaders might further understand how to recognize various degrees of job embeddedness to develop retention plans and lower the escalated costs of turnover (Swider, Boswell, & Zimmerman, 2011). Within that context, the tangential exploration of theories on human relations; recruitment, retention, and generational differences; and leadership and leadership styles has added to the scaffolding of knowledge of why employees choose to remain in their current organization. The problem of turnover is important and putting the joint forces of job embeddedness (fit, links, and sacrifices) together to retain employees who stay highly embedded can be the catalyst for change (Mitchell et al., 2001).

The literature review generated limited research on job embeddedness; therefore, future studies on job embeddedness may include expansion of the findings of this study. As an example, understanding the relationship between human relations and job embeddedness may assist organizations in molding relationships between supervisors and employees. Recruitment, retention, and generational differences (Boomers, Generation X, and Y) should be explored through additional empirical studies on understanding all classes of people, diversity, and work relationships, including generational differences through job embeddedness.

To conclude, the premise of the qualitative phenomenological study was quintessential in exploring job embeddedness through the perceptions and lived experiences of HR practitioners in a government agency. Although the current study was undertaken to explore embeddedness using the organizational aspects of fit, links, and sacrifices, further quantitative research is required to validate the findings of this study in advancing the literature on the community domain. Job embeddedness, according to Mitchell et al. (2001) takes a holistic approach, which means the whole person on or off the job is considered. The concept of job embeddedness may be applied to almost any spectrum related to turnover and work relationships.

According to Buchen (2006), extant theories on HRM and job embeddedness necessitate further studies that might (a) provide proactive measures in identifying when employees become unembedded in an organization from their verbalized intentions to quit, (b) evaluate employee relationships involved in the job embeddedness model (links, fit, and sacrifices) to assist management with best fit placement for employees, and (c) help reduce high turnover costs by recognizing and acting upon employee intentions to quit early, instead of retroactively.

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