

Examining The Role of Job Attribute Preferences in The Rapid Turnover of Newly Hired Retail Employees

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Abstract

In the present study, the authors examine the relationship that job attribute preferences have on the decision to leave for newly hired employees. Samples from three retailers, a department store, a supermarket, and a specialty store were used. Results indicate that although job attributes may not be useful in understanding turnover, they hold promise in explaining unmet worker expectations.

Introduction

The subject of employee turnover is one which has been often studied. While some writers have sought to develop models for the entire process (See Clegg, 1983; and Steers and Mowday, 1981), most research has examined one or more of its components. Considerable effort has been expended to isolate the importance of after-employment issues such as job performance (Darden et al., 1989; Dubinsky and Skinner, 1984; Futrell and Parasuraman, 1984), job involvement (Blau and Boal, 1987), organizational commitment (Darden et al., 1989; Blau and Boal, 1987; Dubinsky and Skinner, 1984; Stumpf and Hartman, 1984; and Mowday et al., 1982) and job satisfaction (Darden et al., 1989; Blau and Boal, 1987; Futrell and Parasuraman, 1984). Although some writers have suggested careful demographic scrutiny can lessen the likelihood of turnover (Treborg and Lee, 1984) and others have examined the impact of the source of employee recruitment on turnover (Harris and Fink, 1978; Boudreau and Rhnes, 1985; Breaugh, 1981), little attention has been given to other pre-employment activities. A promising exception is the body of work in the area of realistic job previews (Caldwell and O'Reilly, 1985; Dubinsky and Skinner, 1984; Dugoni and Ilgen, 1981; Reilly et al., 1981; Wanous, 1976; Ilgen and Seely, 1974).

Although findings have not been totally consistent (Reilly, et al., 1981; Dugoni and Ilgen, 1981; Reilly, Sterling, and Tenopyr, 1979), realistic job previews (RJPs) have most often been shown to have a positive effect on turnover (see review article by Wanous, 1977). The premise on which RJPs rely is that employees that have an accurate understanding of the job they are entering will be

less likely to be surprised by the environment and/or the requirements of the new job. As a result, the knowledgeable new hire should be happier with the organization because there should be less unanticipated circumstances. Clearly, the nature of the entering employee's job perceptions is critical to the research in this area. To test these various turnover related theories, researchers have most often utilized industrial marketing sales forces (Futrell and Parasuraman, 1984), although samples from nursing students (Ferris, 1985), factory workers (Clegg, 1983), Marine enlistees (Youngblood et al., 1983), and computer operators (Graen et al., 1982) have also been used. Recently, interest has been shown in the application of various findings to the retail sector (Good et al., 1988; and Hampton et al., 1988).

Retailers have been looking for answers to help resolve a threatening situation. After years of relying on the young worker to fill their entry level sales positions, retailers have found that the maturing of the "baby boomers" coupled with continued growth in the demand for nonsupervisory employees has left an insufficient supply of workers. The result has been a turbulent employment environment. While wage costs and the benefits provided have risen dramatically, workers have shown little concern about moving from job to job. In fact, turnover rates of 300 percent have been recorded in some retail industries (Serlen, 1986).

In the present study, the issue of differences in job attribute preferences is examined in the context of newly hired retail employees. Special interest was given to new

entry level personnel who ultimately leave the retail organization in a relatively short period of time. The research was conducted in three different retail industries: a department store, a specialty store, and a supermarket. The purpose of the present study was to determine: (1) if differences exist in the incoming job attribute preferences of new employees who continue employment versus those who have left each of the three companies (within eight weeks of data collection) (2) whether or not there are demographic differences in the initial preferences of newly hired employees across the three samples, and (3) if the retailer's perceived ability to provide these job attributes influence the new employee's decision to leave the organization.

The Retail Environment

By 1980, the transformation of the center of retailing activity from the downtown area to the suburbs had largely been completed. This arena presented the retailers with a set of new problems. Specifically, companies face increased staffing demands associated with multiple sites, longer hours, and differing demand peaks. Many retailers looked to the increased usage of the part-time worker to satisfy these demands. For example, the average hours worked per week by non-supervisory retail workers recorded an uninterrupted drop from a high of 38 hours in 1960 to 29.2 hours in 1987. This move to a higher percentage of part-time workers accelerated an already growing demand for workers. Between 1965 and 1985, the number of non-supervisory retail workers grew from 8.4 million to 16 million.

Coinciding with this increased demand, retailers discovered the demographically attractive group of young (16-24 year-old) workers. Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, the large number of baby boomers entering the work force supplied retailers with a more than sufficient number of job applicants. However in 1979, the number of young workers peaked at 26.3 million. At this point, the number of young workers began an almost continuous decline over the next 16 years. By 1995, the number of workers in the 16-24 year-old category will have experienced a 19.4 percent decline from the number available in 1979.

By the mid-1980s retailers were beginning to feel the effects of the conflicting demand/supply trends. By 1990, few retailers had been spared the difficulties associated with finding sufficient numbers of entry level hourly personnel. Not unexpectedly, both the direct and indirect labor costs for these employees has increased. However, an additional ramification of the labor environment has apparently caught many retailers off guard. The result is a substantial increase in the turnover rate for entry level workers. The demand/supply imbalance has created a seller's market. As a result, entry level workers face few, if any, "costs" associated with changing jobs. The plentiful number of jobs has effectively allowed workers to quit

one retailer in the morning and go to work for another at the same or better pay in the afternoon. Unfortunately for retailers, this is an option that a large number of entry level workers have pursued. Apparently, a large number of these workers have adopted an employment philosophy of: "I'll take the job and if I don't like it, I'll quit and get another one." This attitude has created a virtual revolving door for newly hired personnel. As noted previously, fast food retailers are facing as much as 300 percent turnover for part-time workers (Serlen, 1986), while a part-time turnover rate of 150 percent is not uncommon in supermarkets (Fields and Nkomo, 1990). This environment has caused retailers to aggressively seek ways to slow their turnover rate. While some retailers have attempted to return to a higher percentage of full-time employees (Bergman, 1984), most continue to seek ways to improve their retention of existing personnel.

Expectations of Entry Level Workers

For the newly hired entry level retail worker there exists uncertainty regarding the relationship between the importance of various job attributes that a worker initially brings to the job and the decision to leave the job after a relatively short period of time. While the relationship is intuitive and has generally been supported for other types of workers, the relationship has apparently not been explored for the new retail worker.

Little is known about the relative importance of various job attributes of entry level retail workers. At the same time there is a lack of empirical research on the perceptions retail employees have of retail organizations as places of employment. While anecdotal wisdom suggests that entry level job applicants hold negative perceptions of the attributes of retail jobs, this view has not been subject to rigorous scrutiny. One of the few studies that could be located examined college students perceptions of retailing as a career (Swinyard, 1981). Results indicated that college students held negative views of retailing. Further, negative views were more pronounced among more capable students. An additional, perhaps more interesting, question is whether retail employees perceive differences in these attributes between various retail employers.

The direct relationship between job expectation and turnover is suspect (Reilly, et al., 1981). Dugoni and Ilgen (1981) found that lowering job expectations for new retail workers did not raise job satisfaction. This causes some concern as to whether the incoming worker's perceptions of job attributes are a useful consideration in limiting employee turnover in the retail setting.

This paper seeks to begin to consider the strength of the job attributes/turnover relationship for the new retail worker. Specifically, whether there are significant differences in the nature of the initial job attribute preferences

between personnel that leave the organization and those that remain employed. In addition, demographic differences in preferences are also examined. Finally, the strength of the relationship between the perceived importance of a particular job attribute and the company's ability to provide it will be tested across the three retail settings.

The Study

Sample

Early in their first week of employment, newly hired entry level store personnel were asked to complete a questionnaire designed to determine the job attributes that were important to them in a job as well as their perceptions regarding the likelihood their new employer could provide these attributes. Newly hired employees from each of the three retailers were given identical questionnaires. Each of the three retailers were chain operations and responses were gathered from multiple stores at each site. In each case, questionnaires were administered by company personnel at the individual store site. The questionnaires were accompanied by a letter explaining that the research was being conducted by university professors and that all responses were totally confidential and would not be seen by store or company management. Respondents were unmonitored and were given time "on the clock" to fill out the questionnaires. Following completion of the survey, respondents sealed the questionnaires in a return envelope addressed to the researchers and sent it to the company mail room where the researchers later picked it up. A total of 775 questionnaires were collected from three sites; 119 from department store, 356 from specialty store, and 300 from supermarket. Because of the method of data collection, fewer than five percent of potential respondents did not fill out the surveys or filled out so little of it as to render it useless. Data were collected from the supermarket over a two month period in the summer of 1988. Data from the department and specialty stores were collected over two months in the late spring of 1989. The employment environment (i.e., the unemployment rate) remained relatively stable during this period.

Approximately eight weeks following the end of data collection, the researchers obtained employee rosters from each company. The list of new hire respondents was checked against the rosters to determine which of the new personnel were still employed. For the department store, 64 of the 119 respondents (54.6%) had left the company. In the case of the specialty store, 218 of the 356 respondents (61.2%) were no longer employed. Finally, 179 of 300 supermarket new hires (59.7%) were no longer with the firm. Looking at the three samples together, 461 of the 775 (59.5%) had left their respective company.

Measures

The 24 job attributes essentially covered three major

aspects of work: the job itself (e.g., challenging/interesting work), company environment (e.g., pleasant work environment), and compensation/job security (e.g., good salary). A majority of these items were taken from a scale developed by Harris and Fink (1987). Four (private phone, after-hour access to building, stock options, and business cards) of their original 25 items were not appropriate for retail jobs and were eliminated. Three items were substituted (flexible scheduling, tuition waiver opportunity, and medical benefits) which more directly related to the retail environment. These attributes were measured on a seven point Likert-type scale, with the range going from "Very Important" to "Very Unimportant". The employee's perception of the likelihood that the job with the company would provide these attributes was also measured on a seven Likert-type scale, with options range from "Very Likely" to "Very Unlikely". In addition, both the respondent and the employer (at a later date) provided information useful in classifying the respondents into demographic groups.

Method of Analysis

A multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was performed initially to determine if differences existed for job attributes for newly hired employees among the three retailers. Results from the MANOVA indicated no significant differences among the three retailers on the 24 variables. Consequently, all three samples were combined for the balance of the analyses examining job attributes. T-tests were used to identify differences in the initial job expectations between new hires who remained with the company versus those who left the company. A discriminant analysis was also performed to determine if the job attributes could be used to classify stayers and leavers.

T-tests were also employed to identify any differences that existed among the various demographic classifications. These classifications included: sex, marital status, age, education level, and race.

To determine if the retailer influenced the new hire's perception of the company's ability to meet the initial job attributes preference, a multivariate analysis of variance was performed. Because significant differences were found, each retailer was examined independently. New hires for each retailer were tested to determine whether or not an "attribute expectation gap" existed. That is, whether there was a large difference between the importance of each of the 24 job attributes and the individual's perception of the company's ability to provide each of these attributes. Z-tests were used to determine if the attribute gap affected the individual's ultimate decision to stay or leave the organization.

The Findings

Demographic Profile

Table 1 gives a demographic profile of the total sample. The retailers in the present study are dependent on the young (under 25), white, female worker to staff their stores. In each of the noted categories, more than three-fourths of the sample fell into those classifications. In addition, half of the new hires were students -- presently attending either high school or college.

Initial Job Attribute Preferences

As previously noted, MANOVA results indicated (Wilks' lambda = 0.833701, $F = 2.69$) that there were no significant differences in the job attribute variables across the three retailers. Examination of the T-tests for the stayers versus the leavers for the 24 individual job attribute measures indicated no significant differences ($P < 0.10$) for any of the variables.

The results of the discriminant analysis indicated that a total of 61.8 percent of the leavers and 51.9 percent of the stayers were correctly classified. The hit ratio was only 57.8 percent.

Since no retailer differences are apparent, a ranking of the relative importance of the job attributes is reported in Table 2. For the total sample, "boss I can work with", "pleasant work environment", and "enjoyable type of work" were the attributes that the new hires indicated had the highest level of importance to them. Correspondingly, "tuition waiver opportunity", "freedom to do job my own way", and "prestigious job title" were least important to the new workers.

When demographic differences are considered, there were many differences in the initial job attribute preferences (Table 3). There were significant differences on 20 of the 24 job attributes when comparisons are made by gender. In each case, females attached greater importance to them when compared to male respondents. The largest gender differences in importance ratings occurred for "job fits with life style", "medical benefits", "enjoyable type work", and "opportunities to use abilities". There were no significant differences for "opportunity for rapid advancement", "good salary", "freedom to do the job my own way", and "good career paths". There were significant differences in eight of the attribute variables when marital status was considered. For each of the eight, married respondents placed greater importance on the attributes than single respondents. The age and education classifications shared many of the same significant differences. In each instance in which significant differences were noted, the older and/or the non-student indicated the variables to have a higher level of importance. Among the demographic variables considered, only in the race classification was there variability in direction of importance. Of the five variables in which significant differences were noted, "tuition waiver opportunity", "prestigious job title", "good career paths", and "medical benefits" had a higher impor-

tance rating for non-white respondents. However, white respondents placed more importance on "competent and sociable co-workers."

Results of the second MANOVA analysis (Wilks' lambda = 0.66556, $F = 6.09$, $p = .0001$) indicated that retailer differences did exist in the new hire's perception of the likelihood that the company would provide the job attributes. Since significant variation by retailer was found, the balance of the analysis was examined independently for each retailer.

Attribute gaps, although limited in number, were found to exist for two of the three retailers. For the department store, there was a significant difference ($p = .0404$) between the stayers and leavers for the attribute "enjoyable type of work." Leavers perceived that the company would be less likely to meet their expectations on this attribute. In the case of the specialty store, gaps were found for three variables. The variables were: "opportunity for advancement" ($p = .0820$), "flexible scheduling" ($p = .0289$), and "tuition waiver opportunity" ($p = .0804$). For each variable, new hire leavers perceived a larger gap in the retailer's ability to provide their job attribute preferences. There were no significant gaps for the new hire stayers and leavers for the supermarket.

Conclusions

Job attribute preferences may not be useful in understanding turnover among new hire retail clerks. There were no significant differences between stayers and leavers in the importance assigned to each of the 24 job attributes. There were also no differences in the attribute ratings across the three retailers.

The mean ranking for the job attribute preferences may hold importance for the retailer. While some retailers have looked to a higher salary to improve employee retention, it appears this strategy may be suspect. The top three and five of the top six ranked attributes deal with the employee's satisfaction of the immediate work environment. For each of the three samples, the most important attribute clearly was "boss I can work with." The results of this study suggest that perhaps the singly most important thing that retailers could do to improve their employee turnover would be to train their first level managers to insure that they give full consideration to the desires and demands of their entry level employees.

Results did indicate that demographic characteristics influence initial job attribute preferences. Significant differences were found for gender, marital status, education, age, and race. This finding is consistent with Feldman's (1990) argument that demographic factors are critical in understanding the attitudes and behaviors of part-time workers. This underscores the importance of not treating the retail workers as a monolithic group. Clearly,

TABLE 1
DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILE OF NEW HIRES

Variable	Percentage
Sex:	
Male	24.6%
Female	75.4
MARITAL STATUS:	
Single	75.2
Married	24.8
AGE:	
18 and Under	49.2
19 - 24	29.2
25 - 34	12.7
35 - 49	6.5
50 and Over	2.5
EDUCATION:	
Grade School	0.4
Some High School	7.0
Attending High School	35.5
High School	22.8
Some College	13.8
Attending College	14.5
College Degree	4.8
Some Graduate School	0.9
Graduate Degree	0.3
ACTIVE STUDENTS:	
Students	50.0
Non-students	50.0
RACE:	
White	76.8
Black	21.0
Other	2.2

demographic factors color the importance attached to different job attributes. For instance, non-students are more interested in job benefits, company characteristics, and the challenge and security of the work than are student workers. It appears that students, recognizing the temporary nature of the job, place much less importance on these long-term, career-oriented attributes.

The finding of significant differences for two of the three retailers when attribute gaps were examined has serious implications for retention strategies. In the department store setting, leavers had a larger gap between preferences for "enjoyable type work" and the company's ability to satisfy this preference. For the specialty store, gaps were larger for leavers on opportunity for advancement, "flexible scheduling," and "tuition waiver opportunity" compared to stayers. The results indicate the uniqueness and differences in the types of retail organizations. Department store employers need to realize that job applicants who place high value on enjoyable type work do not always perceive department store jobs as providing this requirement and are more likely to leave. The smaller the gap between desired job attributes and perceptions of the company's ability to provide these attributes, the less likely the new hire will exit. In other words, the job fits the employee's perceptions more closely.

On the other hand, if the retail organization actually provides a particular job attribute or benefit and the new hire is unaware of this, efforts must be made to convey more complete information about the job and its desirable attributes during the recruiting and orientation stage. Given a turbulent personnel environment, busy store managers are more likely to rush the new hires to the sales floor without an adequate orientation -- not realizing that their actions may lead to greater future turnover.

TABLE 2
MEAN RANKING OF IMPORTANCE
FOR INITIAL JOB ATTRIBUTES

<u>Expectation</u>	<u>Mean</u>
Boss I Can Work With	1.32
Pleasant Work Environment	1.49
Enjoyable Type work	1.56
Opportunity to Learn	1.57
Flexible Scheduling	1.63
Competent and Sociable Co-Worker	1.64
Opportunity to Show Performance	1.65
Desirable Store Location	1.66
Company's Reputation	1.67
Challenging/Interesting Work	1.69
Good Salary	1.70
Opportunities to Use Abilities	1.75
Job Security	1.77
Job Fits With Lifestyle	1.96
Good Fringe Benefits	2.04
Good Career Paths	2.09
Variety of Activities	2.09
Appropriately Sized Company	2.10
Opportunity for Rapid Advancement	2.11
Medical Benefits	2.25
Training Programs Available	2.32
Prestigious Job Title	2.72
Freedom to do Job My Own Way	2.88
Tuition Waiver Opportunity	2.93

One major question raised by these results is why do retail new hires accept jobs if they do not perceive the job as likely to satisfy their most important job requirements. This observation is even more perplexing when the present job market is considered. These workers accepted jobs in retail when many other options were likely available. Two questions were incorporated into the questionnaire in an attempt to better understand the new hires reaction to the environment. Respondents were asked, "How long do you plan to work for this company?" and "How difficult would it be to find a job similar to the one you have now?" Looking at the latter question first, 84.3 percent of the sample perceived little, if any, difficulty in finding a similar job. Interestingly, nearly half (346) of the sample chose not to respond to the former question. Of those responding, 42 percent anticipated working for the company one year or less while over 92 percent did not plan to remain with the retailer for more than five years.

Although future research is warranted, the responses to these questions may give some insight as to limited value of job attribute preferences in improving employee retention. Few retailers have established career paths that start with the entry level worker. Retailers have used a growing percentage of part-timers and have typically relied on the young worker to staff their stores. These actions signal the entry level employee as to the temporary nature of the job. As a result, entry level retail employees do not view the job with career aspirations. Therefore, their emphasis is on satisfaction with the immediate work environment. If newly hired workers find a particular work environment disappointing, then they will likely show little reluctance to leave because there will be little perceived difficulty associated with finding a similar job and the decision to leave will probably have no impact on the individual worker's ultimate career.

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TABLE 3
DIFFERENCES IN JOB ATTRIBUTE PREFERENCES
BY DEMOGRAPHIC CLASSIFICATIONS

<u>Variable/Characteristic</u>	<u>Classification</u>		<u>P Value</u>
SEX:	Male	Female	
Challenging/Interesting Work	1.94	1.62	.0001
Opportunities to Use Abilities	2.03	1.66	.0001
Opportunity to Learn	1.82	1.48	.0001
Opportunity to Show Performance	1.89	1.48	.0001
Variety of Activities	2.36	2.00	.0001
Competent and Sociable Co-Workers	1.91	1.55	.0001
Enjoyable Type Work	1.88	1.45	.0001
Training Programs Available	2.56	2.24	.0050
Job Security	1.99	1.70	.0053
Good Fringe Benefits	2.27	1.96	.0079
Prestigious Job Title	2.93	2.64	.0454
Pleasant Work Environment	1.73	1.42	.0001
Job Fits With Lifestyle	2.31	1.85	.0001
Boss I Can Work With	1.56	1.23	.0001
Flexible Scheduling	1.85	1.55	.0007
Tuition Waiver Opportunity	3.16	2.84	.0163
Medical Benefits	2.59	2.13	.0004
Company's Reputation	1.92	1.58	.0003
Desirable Store Location	1.81	1.60	.0166
Appropriately Sized Company	2.27	2.04	.0412
MARITAL STATUS:	Single	Married	
Challenging/Interesting Work	1.74	1.55	.0095
Opportunity to Use Abilities	1.79	1.60	.0083
Opportunity to Learn	1.62	1.40	.0010
Training Programs Available	2.40	2.07	.0033
Job Security	1.82	1.62	.0250
Good Fringe Benefits	2.12	1.80	.0020
Medical Benefits	2.38	1.82	.0001
Company's Reputation	1.71	1.53	.0217
AGE:	24/Less	25/Over	
Training Programs Available	2.39	2.09	.0167
Job Security	1.82	1.62	.0336
Good Fringe Benefits	2.10	1.83	.0168
Prestigious Job Title	2.67	2.91	.0886
Medical Benefits	2.37	1.92	.0012
Company's Reputation	1.70	1.55	.0676
EDUCATION:	Stu- dents	Non- Students	
Challenging/Interesting Work	1.79	1.61	.0133
Opportunity to Learn	1.65	1.49	.0142
Training Programs Available	2.52	2.12	.0001
Job Security	1.88	1.67	.0147
Good Fringe Benefits	2.21	1.87	.0005
Medical Benefits	2.53	1.96	.0001
Company's Reputation	1.75	1.58	.0400
Appropriately Sized Company	2.21	2.00	.0355
RACE:	White	Non- White	
Competent & Sociable Co-Workers	1.57	1.84	.0088
Prestigious Job Title	2.80	2.40	.0024
Good Career Paths	2.14	1.90	.0259
Tuition Waiver Opportunity	3.08	2.43	.0001
Medical Benefits	2.31	2.14	.0289

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