



## Integrating ergonomic factors into the decision to retire

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### ABSTRACT

A large body of research describes the factors that influence a worker in the decision to retire. However, the decision processes used by employees have received far less attention. We propose a theoretical model, based on well-established turnover decision process research, which incorporates ergonomics as a critical factor in the decision to retire. Ergonomic factors are proposed as distal factors that play a role in a retirement decision. We propose that they influence worker health and job attitudes, which in turn influence more proximal antecedents of retirement, leading up to the act of retiring.

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### 1. Introduction

As the baby boomer generation nears retirement, the growth of the United States workforce faces a decline (Toosi, 2009). By 2018, nearly 24% of the workforce will be 55 years of age or older, compared to 18% in 2000 (Toosi, 2009). By retaining valuable and productive older employees, organizations can reduce the financial burden associated with turnover (Hom & Griffeth, 1995) and help to ensure that there is an adequate labor pool (Griffeth & Hom, 2001).

Organizations frequently do not hire older workers due to age-related issues (Hedge, Borman, & Lammlein, 2006). For example, ageist stereotypes are perpetuated that employee productivity declines with age and those older workers cannot adapt to technological trends as easily as younger employees (Coberly, 1983). Such claims are largely misconceptions, as research has found no significant differences between the performances of the two groups (Sullivan & Duplaga, 1997). Research has emphatically shown that older employees are assets in the workplace (Arthur, Fuentes, & Doverspike, 1990; Ferris & King, 1992; McEvoy & Cascio, 1989; Reio & Sanders-Reio, 1999).

Over the years, retirement studies have examined the factors that underlie the decision to retire (see Wang & Shultz, 2010 for a review of this literature). Although several models of retirement have been theorized, no research has explored the intermediate linkages, or steps, that employees may use when deciding to retire. Similarly, little or none of the retirement literature has incorporated ergonomics, the study of the compatibility between job demands and user abilities to reduce worker fatigue and discomfort, and increase productivity and user satisfaction. We begin to address this need by proposing a model that adapts a well-researched turnover decision process model (Mobley, 1977) to the decision to retire, and integrates ergonomic factors of the job as distal determinants of the decision to retire. The study of these ergonomic factors is necessary because they contribute directly to known antecedents of turnover, and they have not received adequate attention in the turnover literature. As with turnover, our model assumes that retirement is generally not impulsive and is preceded by a decision-making process that is very similar to the one that precedes quit decisions. We also assume that most retirements are voluntary. In the remaining pages we provide research from the retirement and turnover literatures to support our model. A schematic presentation of the retirement decision process model appears in Fig. 1.

In the following pages, we first outline Mobley's (1977) model to illustrate that the decision to leave is composed of intermediate linkages that can result in the behavioral act of leaving. Then, we briefly review the retirement literature related to

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components of our model (note: this is a short snapshot of the retirement literature not intended to be exhaustive. There are much finer recent reviews of this literature. See Wang & Shultz, 2010 for an example of one.). Then, we describe our adaptation of this model to the decision to retire and present research propositions based on previous turnover and retirement research.

## 2. Intermediate linkages in the turnover decision

In response to Locke (1976) that the relationship between satisfaction and turnover has rarely exceeded .40, Mobley (1977) envisioned a series of “intermediate linkages” between evaluation of the present job – the result of which is satisfaction or dissatisfaction – and turnover. Job dissatisfaction leads to thoughts of quitting, which lead to assessments of the utility of seeking other employment (e.g., the likelihood of finding comparable work) and turnover costs (e.g., the loss of unvested pension benefits). If exit is not costly, the expectation that it would be beneficial to seek another job leads to intention to search and then searching. After finding alternatives, dissatisfied employees will evaluate them, and compare them to their present job. When alternatives are more attractive than their present job, the disparity between them motivates an employee to quit.

In the annals of turnover research, Mobley’s theory has most advanced our understanding of the withdrawal process, and drawn the most empirical scrutiny. Though March and Simon (1958) provided impetus for modern turnover theory and research, Mobley’s (1977) model dominates all work on psychological approaches to turnover. Some theorists, such as Mobley, Griffeth, Hand, and Meglino (1979), expanded Mobley’s model by introducing more distal determinants of the process from satisfaction to leaving present employment; others restated or clarified the termination process (Steers & Mowday, 1981); and still others have refined the model by reconfiguring the intervening mechanisms that translate dissatisfaction (Hom & Griffeth, 1991). More recently, Lee and Mitchell (1994) regard Mobley’s withdrawal sequence as one of multiple routes to turnover. While not adopting the model in its entirety, other turnover theorists adopted one or more of the theoretical constructs that Mobley pioneered,

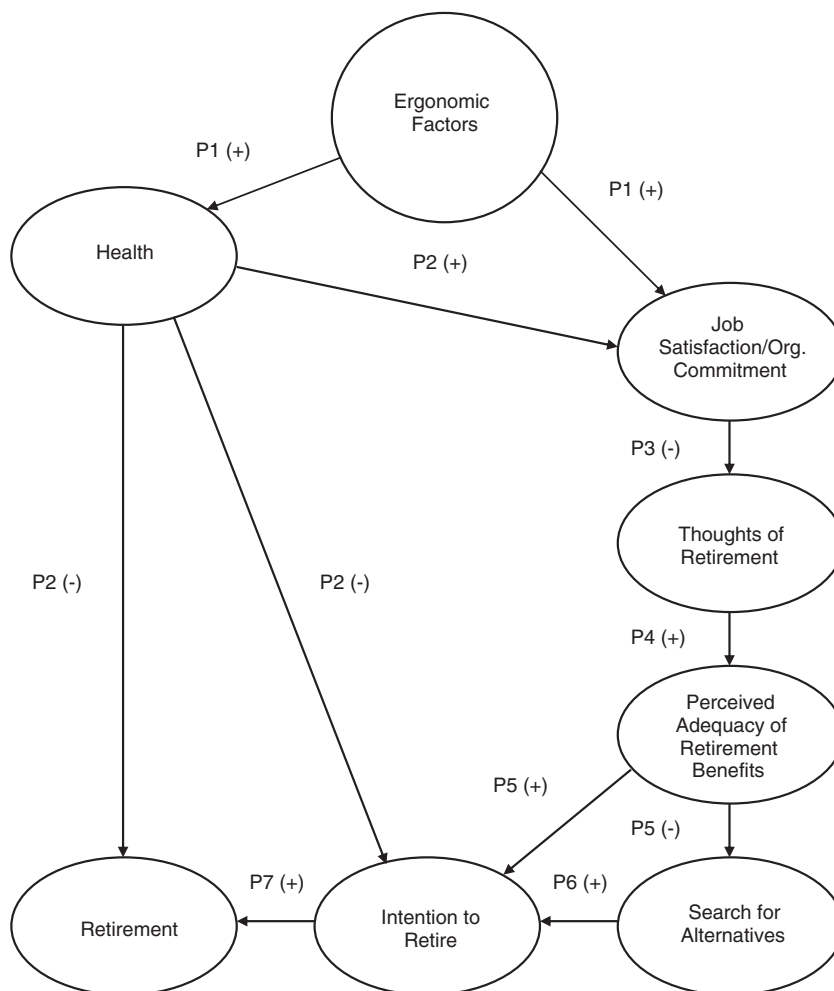


Fig. 1. Model exploring the role of ergonomic factors in the decision to retire.

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