



Improving retention strategies for IT professionals working in the public sector

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ABSTRACT

Despite much research interest, effective retention of IT professionals has proved difficult for many public sector organizations. By concentrating on intention to leave, researchers may not have provided a clear way to formulate effective retention strategies. Consequently, we used intention to stay as an alternative lens to identify factors that can reduce turnover of IT professionals. Our findings indicated that attitudes, perceived behavioral control (PBC), and identification with the organization all had a statistically significant relationship with intention to stay; attitude was the strongest. It was concluded that existing retention strategies needed to be refocused on the issues that make IT staff stay; a number of practical recommendations for IT managers are presented.

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1. Introduction

The IT profession in many countries has had high turnover rates in past years. These rates have ranged from 20% in the 1980s, to 30% in the late 1990s and between 5 and 14% in the 2000s [24]. More recent surveys suggested that while demand for IT professionals fell after the dot com bust, this trend was reversing, with the number of organizations adding exceeding those decreasing staff [26]. Indeed, it has been reported that attracting, developing, and retaining qualified IT staff was first in the top five IT executive management concerns for 2007/2008 [17].

High turnover of IS staff can result in failure of IT projects and persistent high turnover can result in projects being delayed, late, over budget or never completed. The effect of low morale due to burnout or low commitment may mirror the impact of employee turnover. Consequently, retaining a team of healthy, committed, and productive IT employees is vital for maintaining corporate advantage.

In the public sector, creating effective workforce management strategies to retain IT professionals is particularly difficult; there is competition between the public and private sector for well-trained, experienced IT employees. For example, some US state governments have reported IT employee turnover rates of over 11% despite increasing salaries and the introduction of flexi-time. The constraints of civil service systems that emphasize rules and regulations, control systems, political context, and limited autonomy and flexibility hinder the effective recruitment and retention of new staff [12]. These factors are further compounded with the tendency to

purchase package solutions that reduce in-house work to system maintenance and relatively simple high level programming. As a result, IT professionals with portable skills across industries are able to find work with greater challenges and higher salaries elsewhere.

The public sector in the UK is also experiencing difficulties in the retention of IT professionals; problems in filling public sector vacancies are reported across all sectors and skill groups. The National Health Service (NHS) is particularly concerned; it currently requires a major overhaul of all core IS. This requires large numbers of skilled IT professionals to implement the national programme. The NHS requires detailed knowledge of the healthcare process and technologies that support it. Departing employees take with them valuable knowledge and expertise, so it is of paramount importance to retain current IT staff. However, despite the new challenges, the NHS has been having problems in retaining skilled professionals.

Therefore we decided to examine the factors that influenced the intention of IS professionals in the public sector to stay with their current employer. The specific objective was to investigate factors and consider the views of current IS professionals working in the NHS. The theory of planned behavior (TPB) was utilized as the underlying theoretical framework; it has been used to investigate an individual's intention to perform a given behavior [4].

2. Turnover research

The serious negative impact that turnover can have on an organization has led to much interest in identifying the factors that predict IT professionals' intention to leave an organization. Several studies have been conducted and found that the major factors were job satisfaction with its antecedents, role conflict and ambiguity, and perceived organizational commitment.

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However, developing appropriate retention strategies for IT professionals has proved difficult for many organizations. For example, in the US, managers expect IT professionals to remain in a job for only 30 months and for some roles the average tenure is only 19 months [11]. Furthermore, there are some IT professionals that appear to be quite content with their current job and yet continue to look for alternative employment [18]. These suggest that current turnover research fails to capture important aspects of the process or that staff turnover is not explained by work related factors alone.

One area that may help explain this paradox is that prior studies mainly considered the behavioral target of leaving rather than of staying. Maybe by concentrating on leaving, studies did not provide a clear way of formulating an effective retention strategy for IT staff.

It is common to assume that staying is the direct converse of leaving but Fuller et al. [9] observed that this assumes that the cognitive processes for both intentions are effectively the same. They argued that this symmetry is unlikely to occur. Essentially, the development of an individual's intention to leave is different from the intention to stay. Similarly, Lee and Mitchell's [16] model of turnover, suggested that trajectory and strategic images for leaving or staying were different and that they involved different psychological processes. Consider the activities of a software engineer who is tempted to take a job with another employer providing better benefits. She chooses to stay with her employer because she likes the people with whom she works. Thus her motive for staying was different that for leaving [22]. Surveys of retained employees may therefore help to identify the strengths of an organization and help promote employee loyalty.

A further dimension that needs to be considered in attempting to refine existing retention strategies is the fact that IT professionals possess a number of distinct characteristics that differentiate them from other professions. Couger and Zawacki [5] found that they had a strong need for accomplishment through learning and developing current skills and being challenged and stimulated in their work. They reported that programmers tended to have a low social need strength with less skill in verbal communication or need for interaction. They also found that IT managers were unique because of their high growth and low social needs. Consequently, our study investigated the issues that affected public sector IT staff in deciding to stay with their employer.

3. Theoretical framework

The TPB [2] is shown in Fig. 1. It has been successfully applied in a range of settings associated with recruitment and retention [13,14,25].

Ajzen argued that intention is the direct antecedent to performing a behavior, so the stronger the intention to engage in behavior, the more likely its performance. TPB proposed that there are three principal determinants of intention: attitude towards the behavior, the degree to which a person has a favorable or unfavorable evaluation of it; subjective norm (SN), the perceived social pressure to perform or not to perform it; and perceived behavioral control (PBC), the perceived ease or difficulty of performing it. In our study the focus was on intention to stay, since staying could not be investigated in the timescale of our experiment. Although, measuring actual behavior would have been desirable using a longitudinal study, such an approach may be undermined because actual departure depends upon current economic conditions. Hence four of the constructs were considered; actual behavior was omitted.

In addition, meta-analyses of applications of TPB have reported that attitudes have frequently been found to contribute significantly to predictions of intention, whereas the results for SN and PBC have been more mixed. Given the importance of attitudes, we

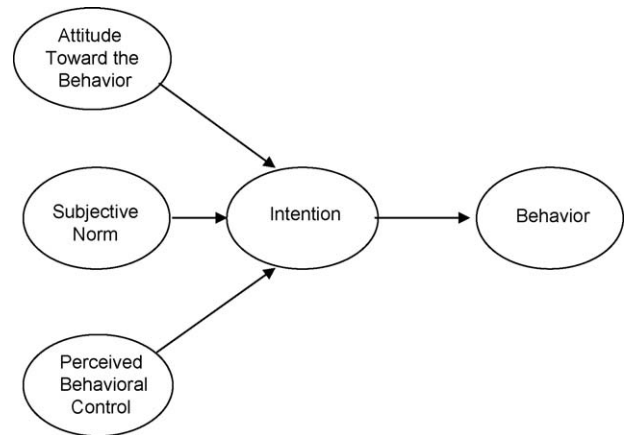


Fig. 1. Theory of planned behavior.

considered behavioral beliefs that may influence the attitudes of IT professionals towards continuing to work for the NHS. However, because the precise influence of SN and PBC is less clear we focused only on these constructs and did not consider their antecedents (normative beliefs (for SN) and control beliefs (for PBC)).

3.1. Extending TPB

It has been argued that sense of identity is likely to drive a person's behavior [23]. Some researchers viewed identity as being separate from other elements of the TPB and emphasized the social aspects of identity, including identity with a social construct or group. Identification with an organization has been found to be strongly negatively correlated with intention to leave an organization [20]. Some individual's working within the public sector have a sense of identification with their employer because they are contributing to the public good rather than purely profit focused [3]. We investigated whether working in a public sector health organization had any bearing on IT professionals' intention to continue working in the organization.

4. Contextual background

The UK NHS was created in 1948. It brought together hospitals, general practitioners, opticians, dentists, and many other services into an integrated and organized service that provided healthcare for the population. Pay and Workforce Research [19] offered the most comprehensive, recent view of recruitment and retention issues of IT professionals in the NHS. Three core reasons were identified as reasons for not being able to fill vacancies. The first was that NHS salaries did not match those of competitors. Secondly, the poor image of the NHS due to mergers, insecurity, stress, high workload, insufficient resources, and few career or training pathways was seen as hindering its ability to recruit staff. Thirdly, the poor working environment and accommodation for IT functions reinforced the low profile and poor image of IT in the NHS. Overall, retaining staff was considered to be more important than recruiting new staff. Many managers cited the high levels of time and money needed to train and develop staff in the specialist skills needed to work in the NHS and that their loss had a major impact on their ability to deliver services. There was a feeling that many IT professionals used the NHS as a training ground to gather specialist skills and experience that enabled them to find better career and remuneration opportunities outside the NHS. A number of specific factors were identified as contributing to poor retention levels; these included excessive workload, high user expectations, and unrealistic demands causing stress and demotivation. A lack of

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