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Correlates of employee turnover intentions in oil and gas industry in the UAE

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper aims to develop a framework to understand, predict and control factors affecting employee turnover intentions in the oil and gas industry in the UAE. The oil and gas industry, considered as the backbone of UAE's economy, has been facing high employee turnover rate.

Design/methodology/approach – The paper examined researches conducted in the area of employee turnover intentions and proposed a framework to be used by the practicing managers to retain employees and leverage their potentials for organizational growth.

Findings – A framework of employee turnover intentions was developed based on body of research literature which suggests to the interplay of individual-, group-, environmental- and organizational-level variables.

Research limitations/implications – The proposed framework on employee turnover intentions is well-suited for usage in the oil and gas industry in the UAE. However, the proposed framework can also be utilized with caution in other industries as well.

Practical implications – The study incorporates correlates of employee turnover intentions in a framework for helping practicing managers to design interventions to retain talent for the benefits of both the employees and the organizations.

Originality/value – This paper provides a comprehensive framework which can help practitioners and also academics to understand the underlying causes of turnover in the oil and gas industry.

Keywords UAE, Turnover, Turnover intentions, Oil and gas industry

Paper type Conceptual paper

Introduction

One of the main challenges facing organizations in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) is the high employee turnover rates. According to an article on the *Gulf News* (2008) Web site, high employee turnover rates cost organizations in the UAE about $2.7 billion a year. The report highlights that employee recruitment and retention in the Middle East will continue to pose challenges for both public and private organizations. It also states that, according to the UAE Ministry of Labor, the employee turnover rate stands at a very high figure of 21 per cent, with the estimated average length of time for an employee to hold a job in the UAE at around 4.7 years (*Gulf News*, 2008). Within the same context, a case study on cultural diversity in the UAE also highlighted that in one of the organizations operating in the UAE, the average time a manager holds a job is between one and two years, which goes up to five years for supervisory jobs (De Bono *et al.*, 2011).

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The UAE is a major player in the oil and gas industry, with an estimated 10 per cent of global oil reserves and 4 per cent of global natural gas reserves (Shihab, 2001). The unprecedented increases in energy prices led to a storm of energy-related investments in the world, especially in the oil-rich Gulf Council Countries (GCC), which have invested an estimated $1.8 trillion in these projects. The UAE has had a big share in these investments: it has invested more than $81 billion in new oil and gas projects since 2009 (Shana, 2004; Parry *et al.*, 2006; Salisbury and Mirza, 2010).

Furthermore, the Abu Dhabi Economic Vision of 2030 presented a plan of continuous growth in oil and gas investments to meet the global demand, in parallel with investments to focus on developing other sectors to help the emirate achieve a neutral non-oil trade balance (ADCED, 2008). Thus, the investments in the oil and gas industry and new ventures meant an increased demand for a skilled workforce, contributing to the existing shortage.

A unique feature for organizations operating in the oil and gas industry is that oil fields are located in remote areas, and the majority of employees are based in these locations. These remote areas are not in proximity to cities or towns (onshore or offshore), and the accommodation facilities associated with these locations vary from temporary housing and campsites to accommodation blocks on rigs.

Employee turnover and turnover intentions

Mobley (1982) conducted early work on understanding why employees voluntarily elect to leave their organizations. Employee turnover can be categorized into voluntary and involuntary turnover. Voluntary turnover occurs when employees decide to stop working with their organizations and resign, whereas involuntary turnover refers to organizations choosing to dismiss employees (Abbasi and Hollman, 2000). Turnover can also be categorized as dysfunctional (where organizations fail to retain star employees) or functional (where organizations shed poor performers) (Boudreau and Berger, 1985; Jackofsky, 1984; Trevor *et al.*, 1997).

Research in this context has also highlighted that organizations endure high financial costs owing to employee turnover. Organizations must bear the responsibility for both direct and indirect expenses associated with turnover. The direct costs are associated with exit interviews, new recruitment, training and compensation. Indirect costs are non-financial in nature, like the loss of valuable organizational knowledge and decreased employee motivation (Bassi, 1997; Frank *et al.*, 2004; O'Connell and Kung, 2007). Employee turnover impacts organizations by disturbing operations as well as team dynamics and performance, translating into further financial costs for organizations (Kesner and Dalton, 1994; Mello, 2011).

Turnover intentions, on the other hand, are defined as the thoughts occupying employees regarding voluntarily leaving their organizations or quitting their jobs (Watrous *et al.*, 2006). The importance of turnover intentions lies in the implications for organizations, which can be addressed before employees actually leave organizations (Campion, 1991). Although several methods can be used to predict turnover, like job satisfaction, organizational commitment, work stress, etc., researchers consider measuring turnover intentions as one of the best predictors of turnover, as well as a predecessor of actual employee turnover (Griffeth *et al.*, 2000; Trimble, 2006; Van Dick *et al.*, 2004).

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Correlates of employee turnover intentions

Nowadays, turnover intentions are interpreted as a measure for understanding turnover before employees actually quit or leave organizations. They provide organizations with valuable opportunities to react before employees actually leave the organizations (Harris *et al.*, 2005). Hence, it is important for management and leadership teams to understand the impact of leadership on employees' intentions to leave organizations.

The literature has depicted organizational commitment as playing an important role *vis-à-vis* employees' intentions to quit their jobs. Organizational commitment has been conceptualized as the level of an individual's devotion toward the organization or the affective attachment of the individual to an organization. This concept involves employees demonstrating willingness to exert higher efforts for the organization, willingness to stay with the organization and willingness to accept organizational goals and targets. Previous examinations of organizational commitment have revealed that it deals with employees' involvement with their organizations. Researchers have elaborated that commitment is much more than loyalty; it involves active relationships between the employee and the organization, whereby employees are willing to give their best to the well-being of their organizations (Mowday *et al.*, 1982; Smith *et al.*, 1983).

Meyer and Allen (1991) developed a model with three components of commitment, namely, affective commitment, continuance commitment and normative commitment. Affective commitment is defined as the employee's emotional attachment to identification and involvement in the organization. Continuance commitment is defined as the feelings employees have in relation to their need to stay with the organization because of the benefits that would be lost if they left. In other words, the feelings relate to the perceived costs and consequences associated with leaving the organization. The last component of organizational commitment as defined by Meyer and Allen is normative commitment, which reflects feelings of obligation to remain with the organization.

Organizational commitment continues to be an exciting field of research and studies, influencing managers and researchers. Organizations need to adapt and foster greater commitment and understanding of how employee commitment develops if they hope to reduce employee turnover and improve on-the-job behavior (Meyer and Allen, 1997). Research has linked organizational commitment to turnover intentions, where all three types of commitment have a negative relationship with turnover intentions, with stronger correlations when associated with actual turnover (Meyer *et al.*, 2002).

In the UAE context, several studies have been carried out to understand the relationship between employee turnover intentions and organizational commitment. Yousef (2002) carried out a study with emphasis on the Arabic cultural perspective; the results indicate that high correlations exist between organizational commitment and turnover intentions. Suliman and Al-Junaibi (2010) also state that a significant negative relationship exists between organizational commitment and turnover intentions. In view of the above findings, the following is proposed:

P1. There will be a significant relationship between the organizational commitment and the turnover intentions of employees working in remote areas in the oil and gas industry in the UAE.

The effect of organizational commitment and its relationship with turnover intentions in the literature can be classified into four main dimensions: organizational factors,

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environmental factors, individual/personal factors and job-related interpersonal factors (Ghosh *et al.*, 2013; Lockwood and Ansari, 1999; Porter and Steers, 1973).

According to Lee *et al.* (2012), organizations with higher levels of corporate sponsorship have employees showing higher organizational commitment and lower levels of turnover intentions, which enhances organizational cohesiveness. Yücel (2012) highlights that job satisfaction positively impacts organizational commitment and is an antecedent of turnover intentions. Researchers have also studied leadership styles and behaviors as organizational factors impacting turnover intentions. Albrecht and Andreetta (2011) indicate that leaders who adapt empowering and engaging styles enable conditions for employees to demonstrate affective commitment with less intent to leave the organization. Another organizational factor represented by training and development was explored by Jehanzeb *et al.* (2013), who highlight that the availability of training in organizations is positively related to organizational commitment and, in turn, to turnover intentions. A similar study carried out by Newman *et al.* (2011) examined the impact of employee perception on organizational commitment and its impact on turnover intentions; the study did not find evidence of an impact on organizational commitment of employees by the motivation to learn and the perceived benefits of training. Researchers also examined the impact of mentoring on organizational commitment and turnover intentions. Payne and Huffman (2005) indicated that mentoring was positively related to affective commitment and continuance commitment; furthermore, results also showed that mentoring was negatively related to turnover behavior.

Researchers have also argued that career growth opportunities showed a significant influence on turnover intentions when professional development and remuneration growth were analyzed, whereas the speed of promotions and career goal progress showed no significant relationships (Karavardar, 2014; Shahzad *et al.*, 2011). Addae *et al.* (2006) explored perceived organizational support, the psychological contact and its impact on organizational commitment. They found that the employees perceived that organizational support influences their affective commitment which in turn reduces the turnover intentions.

Several studies have been carried out exploring organizational factors and their impact on turnover intentions within the context of the UAE. Elanain (2010) highlights the strong mediating role of organizational commitment in the relationship between organizational justice and turnover intentions. Elanain (2014) further explored the leadership behavior represented by leader–member exchange and its impact on turnover intentions. Suliman and Al Obaidli (2011) indicate that the corporate climate significantly predicts employee turnover. Based on the above arguments, the following is proposed:

P2. Organizational factors (i.e. leadership behaviors, organizational growth opportunit*ies and con*tinuous operations) will have significant relationships with the organizational commitment of employees working in remote areas in the oil and gas industry in the UAE.

P3. Organizational factors (i.e. leadership behaviors, organizational growth opportunitie*s and cont*inuous operations) will have significant relationships with the turnover intentions of employees working in remote areas in the oil and gas industry in the UAE.

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Several studies have also assessed the impact of individual/personal employee characteristics on turnover intentions. Mitchell *et al.* (2000) emphasize that individual characteristics are significant predictors of turnover intentions. Arnold and Feldman (1982) observed the relationship between the level of education of employees and turnover, stating that highly educated employees are more likely to leave organizations. Researchers have also indicated that the age of employees has a negative relationship with turnover, with younger employees being more likely to leave organizations (Cotton and Tuttle, 1986; Dewar and Werbel, 1979; Kabungaidze *et al.*, 2013). Gregersen and Black (1992) state that employees with longer working experience display lower turnover intentions. Researchers also investigated the influence of gender and the emotionalized nature of commitment. Fisher *et al.* (2010) found that the existing measures of organizational commitment are not suitable to measure the commitment of women and some men in contemporary workplaces. Researchers also explored the relationship between emotional intelligence and organizational commitment, Nikolaou and Tsaousis (2002) found positive correlations between emotional intelligence and organizational commitment, where individuals scoring high on emotional intelligence were also showing higher organizational commitment. In view of the above, the following is proposed:

P4. The individual factors of employees (such as their age, length of service, marital status *and lev*el of education) will have significant relationships with the organizational commitment of employees working in remote areas in the oil and gas industry in the UAE.

P5. The individual factors of employees (such as their age, length of service, marital status *and le*vel of education) will have significant relationships with the turnover intentions of employees working in remote areas in the oil and gas industry in the UAE.

Researchers have also explored the environmental factors that influence employee turnover. Birdseye and Hill (1995) identify environmental factors as lead predictors of turnover intentions when compared to organizational factors. Moreover, researchers have indicated that employees who have access to healthy work–life balance, represented in family-friendly programs or processes, show greater organizational commitment and lower turnover intentions (Grover and Crooker, 1995; Wang and Walumbwa, 2007). Russo and Buonocore (2012) explored the intersection of work and family and its impact on organizations, concluding that the employees who experienced work–family enrichment were less likely to think about leaving; McNall *et al.* (2010) also highlighted that work to family enrichment mediates the relationship between work arrangements and both turnover intentions and job satisfaction. Tung-Chun *et al.* (2007), on the other hand, investigated the quality of work life and its impact on job-related attitudes like organizational commitment and turnover intentions. Their findings highlighted that the multiple dimensions of quality of work life were significant predictors of the outcomes of commitments and turnover intentions. The above arguments lead to the following:

P6. Environmental factors will have significant relationships with the organizational commitment of employees working in remote areas in the oil and gas industry in the UAE.

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P7. Environmental factors will have significant relationships with the turnover intentions of employees working in remote areas in the oil and gas industry in the UAE.

Although the propositions presented above are grounded in the literature and were arrived at through a thorough understanding of the concepts, further empirical testing is required to test these hypotheses to establish the model as applicable in relating turnover intentions to the three sets of factors that impact the turnover intentions of employees working in remote areas in the UAE's oil and gas industry. Table I summarizes the different factors that influence employee turnover.

Proposed framework of employee turnover intentions

Based on the literature reviewed, a conceptual model built upon theoretical data is proposed, linking the three dimensions of attributes influencing organizational commitment and its impact on turnover intentions, especially for employees working in remote areas in the UAE's oil and gas industry.

Figure 1 presents the model. Turnover intentions are the dependent variable, organizational commitment is the mediator and the independent variables are environmental factors (working in remote areas and work–life balance), organizational factors (leadership behavior, growth opportunities and continuous operations) and individual factors (age, tenure, marital status and education).

Conclusions and implications

The oil and gas industry in the UAE is the backbone of the economy and will continue to play a major role in the country's future, as will the attempts of the government to invest in alternate industries to diversify the country's economy. Although researchers have proposed many models to predict the turnover of employees by analyzing several factors, no specific model exists for employees working in remote areas in the oil and gas industry. This conceptual paper attempts to develop and propose a model that applies to the unique conditions of employees working in such areas. This conceptual paper presents a model that primarily focuses on the impacts of continuous operations (shift work), leadership behavior, growth opportunities and working in remote areas on turnover intentions. Moreover, it also tries to explore the management's role in retaining UAE nationals working in remote areas.

This framework could shed the light on old work rotation cycles that do not provide any environmental stimulants for employees to pursue a career in the oil and gas industry in remote areas. Developing this framework further would be extremely beneficial to practitioners in this area, as it would influence the decision makers to introduce changes to the working cycles of the employees working in remote areas, reducing the job stresses associated with working in such conditions. This framework will also be of high interest to human resource managers of oil and gas companies in the UAE and could be further correlated to oil and gas companies in the GCC region.

Nevertheless, the expected implications are based on the literature reviewed, and the framework should be further tested by both academics and practitioners in order for its implications to be effectively utilized in the industry.

Serial no.	Variable	Author(s)	Key findings
1	Organizational commitment	Meyer *et al.* (2002)	All three types of commitment have negative relationships with turnover intentions
		Yousef (2002)	There is a high correlation between commitment and turnover intentions
		Lockwood (2006)	Committed employees show higher performance and less intention to resign
		Suliman and Al-Junaibi (2010)	There is a significant negative relationship between organizational commitment and turnover intentions
2	Organizational factors	Payne and Huffman (2005)	Mentoring is positively related to affective and continuance commitment and negatively related to turnover intentions
		Addae *et al.* (2006)	Perceived organizational support influences affective commitment and reduces turnover intentions
		Elanain (2010)	Organizational commitment highly mediates the relationship between organizational justice and turnover intentions
		Albrecht and Andreetta (2011)	Empowering leadership behavior impacts affective commitment and reduces turnover intentions
		Suliman and Al Obaidli (2011)	The corporate climate significantly predicts turnover among employees
		Newman *et al.* (2011)	No significant impact of employee perception of training and motivation benefits on organizational commitment
		Lee *et al.* (2012)	Corporate sponsorship is negatively related to employee turnover
		Yücel (2012)	A negative relationship exists between job satisfaction and turnover intentions
		Jehanzeb *et al.* (2013)	The availability of training is positively related to organizational commitment
		Karavardar (2014)	The career growth opportunities represented by professional development have a significant influence on turnover intentions
		Elanain (2014)	Organizational commitment partially mediates the relationship between leader–member exchange and turnover intentions
3	Individual factors	Dewar and Werbel (1979)	The age of employees has a negative relationship with turnover intentions
		Arnold and Feldman (1982)	Highly educated employees are more likely to leave organizations
		Gregersen and Black (1992)	Employees with longer working experience are less likely to leave their organizations

(*continued*)

Table I. The factors that influence employee turnover

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Serial no.	Variable	Author(s)	Key findings
		Mitchell *et al.* (2000)	Individual characteristics are linked to turnover intentions
		Nikolaou and Tsaousis (2002)	Positive correlations between individuals emotional intelligence and turnover intentions
		Fisher *et al.* (2010)	Existing measures for organizational commitment are not suitable for women in contemporary workplaces
4	Environmental factors	Birdseye and Hill (1995)	Environmental factors are lead predictors of turnover intentions
		Grover and Crooker (1995)	Employees with access to family-friendly processes show lower turnover intentions
		Wang and Walumbwa (2007)	The work–life balance represented by family-friendly programs is related to organizational commitment
		Tung-Chun *et al.* (2007)	Dimensions of quality of work life predicts outcomes of commitments and turnover intentions
		McNall *et al.* (2010)	Work to family enrichment mediates the relationship between work arrangements and turnover intentions
		Russo and Buonocore (2012)	Employees experiencing work–family enrichment have lower turnover intentions

Table I.

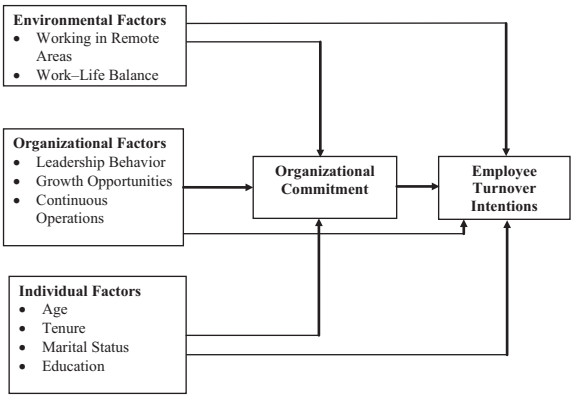

Figure 1.
Proposed framework of employee turnover intentions

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