

# **Psychological Antecedents to Intention to Quit**

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*A random sample of adults was surveyed to explore the relationships among derailment, productivity propensity, and intention to quit. Derailed individuals perceive a lack of self-continuity and productivity propensity represents individuals' disposition to perform tasks in a timely manner. Results indicated that intention to quit was positively affected by derailment and negatively affected by productivity propensity. Managerial implications of the findings, as well as directions for future research was discussed.*

*Keywords: derailment, productivity propensity, intention to quit*

## **INTRODUCTION**

Why do individuals quit their job? Which individuals are more likely to quit compared to others? Can organizations detect and intervene in employees' intention to quit? The current study seeks answers to these questions from an intraindividual psychological perspective; meaning the study does not focus on factors external to employees which they cannot control. Specifically, the study uses temporal comparison theory (Albert, 1977) to illustrate why some employees are more likely to have a greater propensity to quit than others.

Employee turnover is a significant concern for organizations. In addition to the loss of job-specific knowledge and expertise, the turnover of just one employee can cost an organization between 93% to 200% of that employee's salary (Treglown, Zivkov, Zarola, and Furnham, 2018). Fishbein and Ajzen (1975, p. 369) argued that the "best single predictor of an individual's behavior will be a measure of his intention to perform that behavior." Consequently, researchers have focused on the determinants of intention to quit for more than four decades (*e.g.*, Mobley, Griffeth, Hand, and Meglino, 1979). Past studies have focused on personality traits, organizational factors, and environmental factors as predictors of intention to quit. However, relatively less attention has been given to psychological factors that may affect intention to quit. Thus, the purpose of the current study is to explore psychological differences that may exist between quitters and stayers of an organization.

## THEORY AND HYPOTHESES

### Temporal Comparison Theory

The self-identity of an individual is his/her answer to the question of “Who am I?” Multiple dimensions of self-identities such as, employee, parent, spouse, colleague, etc. make up an individual’s self-concept; a repertoire of autobiographical knowledge structures that regulate cognition and behavior based on perceptions of themselves and others (Johnson, Chang, and Yang, 2010). Using a conceptual translation of Festinger’s (1954) social comparison theory, Albert (1977) argued that “a single individual might compare a description of himself now with a description of himself in the past” (p. 485) thereby engaging in a temporal comparison that can be used to conceptualize an individual’s “actual past, actual present, and potential future” (Obodaru 2012, p. 34). Given that individual self-concept represents the beliefs about one’s own self (Fiske and Taylor, 1991), temporal comparison theory predicts that a comparison of past and current self-concept is implicit among individuals. Over time, if an individual’s perception of self remains stable, he/she experiences self-continuity, “a sense of connection between one’s past and one’s present” (Sedikides et al., 2016, p. 525).

However, what are the consequences of a significant change in self-identity over time? Albert (1977, p. 488) argued that individuals “need to establish and maintain a sense of personal identity *over time*.” The need to maintain an enduring, coherent, and integrated self-identity over time will propel individuals to re-evaluate and adjust to perceived changes in aspects of the self. Burrow et al. (2020) coined the term “derailment” to represent the failure to perceive self-continuity over time. One such adjustment could be withdrawing from the occupation during which derailment occurred. Since employees’ self-concept is derived from beliefs about themselves (Baumeister, 1999), including their attributes and who they are, any temporal imbalance in self-identity could lead to withdrawal from an organization with the intention to quit. That is, intention to quit could be a coping mechanism for derailment. Formally stated,

*Hypothesis 1: Derailment will be positively related to intention to quit.*

## PRODUCTIVITY PROPENSITY

Harris et al. (2014) introduced “productivity propensity” as a new construct to fill the void in individual performance literature based upon the way frontline employees reconcile their short-term and long-term performance goals. While boundary spanning employees are expected to meet managerial expectations of achieving short-term performance goals, they are also expected to meet organizational goals of achieving long-term customer satisfaction. Harris et al. (2014, p. 173) defined productivity propensity as “a disposition to successfully accomplish job-related tasks in a timely manner.”

Productivity propensity (PP) has been conceptualized as a personal resource and an individual difference variable (Harris, 2020). Even if employees are derailed, they can use PP as a buffer against their intention to quit. Thus, any intra-individual conflict induced by derailment may be negated by PP. Past research has noted some beneficial effects of PP among employees. For example, PP was negatively related to role conflict and role ambiguity, and positively related to self-rated performance (Harris, 2020). PP has also been shown to enhance employees’ ability to satisfy customer needs and improve their job satisfaction (Harris and Fleming, 2017). Thus, PP is expected to lower employees’ intention to quit. Therefore,

*Hypothesis 2: Productivity propensity will be negatively related to intention to quit.*

## METHODOLOGY

A total of 189 participants ( $M_{age} = 43.6$ , Male = 48%) were recruited through CloudResearch and provided monetary compensation in exchange for their participation in the study. To qualify for participation in the study, respondents were required to be in current full-time employment with an organization. Results indicate that, on average, the participants held nearly 7 years and 8 months of

employment history with their respective company. In addition, respondent employment represented a wide range of business sizes, 100 or less employees (27%), 100 – 999 employees (33%), 1000 – 3499 employees (17%) and 3500 or more employees (23%). Eight respondents were unaware of the number of employees in their organization. It is also worth noting that the sample was highly educated, with 68% of the participants reporting having acquired a bachelor’s degree or higher level of education.

Participants were instructed to respond to a series of questions related to their career, as well as personal motivations to continue in their current position (see Appendix). First, participants were instructed to respond to a series of items assessing their productivity propensity ( $\alpha = 0.83$ ). The construct was assessed using the PROPEN four-item scale developed by Harris et al. (2014) which includes items such as “I work hard to increase my productivity on the job”. Next, derailment ( $\alpha = 0.89$ ) was assessed using a six-item scale developed by Burrow et al. (2020) which includes items such as “I feel like I’ve become a different type of person over time.” Participants were then asked to evaluate their intentions to leave or quit their current employment. Instead of using a single-item global measure of intention to quit, a series of statements were compiled from past research to create a four-item scale ( $\alpha = 0.94$ ). Example items include “There is a high probability that I will quit my job if I get another suitable offer” and “I intend to search for a position with another employer” (Hinshaw and Atwood, 1984; Nissly et al., 2005; Roodt, 2004; Vandenberghe et al., 2002). All items were rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (“Strongly Disagree”) to 5 (“Strongly Agree”).

## DATA ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

Structural equation modeling was used to assess the convergent validity of the measures. Based on confirmatory factor analyses, the 4-item PROPEN scale ( $\chi^2 = 4.41, df = 2, p > 0.10, CFI = 0.99$ ) and the 4-item intention quit scale ( $\chi^2 = 4.21, df = 2, p > 0.10, CFI = 0.99$ ) showed satisfactory fit indices. However, the initial fit statistics of the 6-item derailment scale were not satisfactory. Based on squared multiple correlations, two items from the measure were deleted. The fit statistics of the resulting 4-item derailment scale ( $\chi^2 = 5.28, df = 2, p > 0.05, CFI = 0.99$ ) were satisfactory. The convergent validity of each of the three constructs was established, as all path estimates were found to be significant ( $t > 2.00$ ).

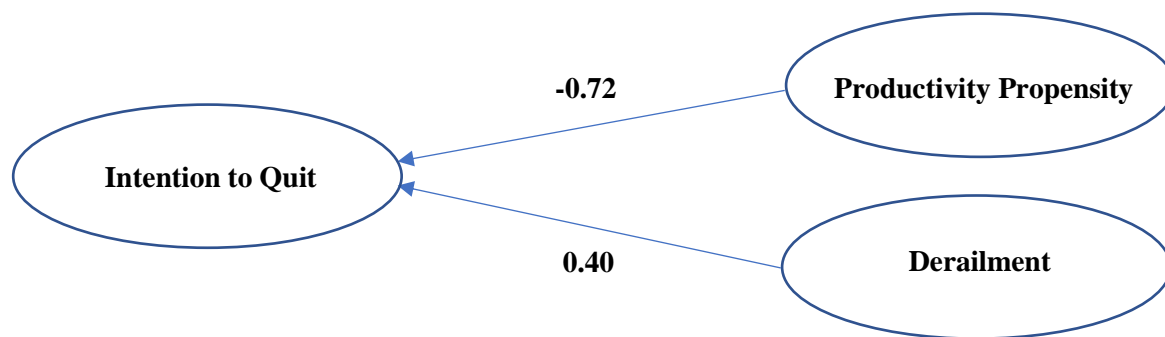
Factor analyses was used to assess discriminant validity. The items measuring the three latent constructs were subjected to an exploratory factor analysis. Using a principal components extraction and Promax rotation, three factors emerged. The eigen values of each of the factors were greater than 1. The KMO value was 0.85 which confirmed the sampling adequacy. The Bartlett’s test of sphericity was significant ( $\chi^2 = 1621.84, df = 66, p < 0.01$ ) indicating that the factors were uncorrelated. The items loaded on their respective factors and there were no significant cross-loadings. Thus, discriminant validity was established. See Table 1.

**TABLE 1**  
**FACTOR ANALYSIS OF THE MEASUREMENT SCALES**

Items	Productivity Propensity	Derailment	Intention to Quit
I worked hard to increase my productivity on the job.	<b>0.83</b>		
I used my time wisely on the job.	<b>0.89</b>		
I prided myself on being very productive in my job activities.	<b>0.82</b>		
I hated to waste time on the job.	<b>0.75</b>		
How I saw myself in the past is different from how I see myself now.		<b>0.89</b>	
I feel like I have become a different type of person over time.		<b>0.92</b>	

Items	Productivity Propensity	Derailment	Intention to Quit
Sometimes I notice how different I am now from who I used to be.		<b>0.94</b>	
I am surprised at who I have become.		<b>0.78</b>	
There is a high probability that I will quit my job if I get another suitable offer			<b>0.95</b>
I occasionally think about leaving this organization.			<b>0.91</b>
I intend to search for a position with another organization.			<b>0.97</b>
I frequently scan the internet in search of alternative job opportunities.			<b>0.83</b>

Study hypotheses were tested by a path analysis using structural equation modeling. In the model, derailment and productivity propensity affected intention to quit. The data fit the model well ( $\chi^2 = 75.97$ ,  $df = 52$ , CFI = 0.98, and RMSEA < 0.05). The path estimates provided support for both the hypotheses, as shown below.



As the figure indicates, the path estimates of the effect of derailment on intention to quit was significantly positive ( $\lambda = 0.40$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), and that of the effect of productivity propensity on intention to quit was significantly negative ( $\lambda = -0.72$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). Thus, Hypotheses 1 and 2 were supported. A discussion of the findings follows.

## DISCUSSION

The effects of turnover have continued to draw significant research attention due its negative effects on organizational performance and social capital losses (Shaw, Duffy, Johnson, and Lockhart, 2005). The collective turnover has been proposed to moderate the relationship between human capital resources and organizational performance (Nyberg, and Ployhart, 2013). The costs of voluntary turnover include, separation costs, vacancy costs, replacement costs, training costs, and bench costs (Karsan, 2007). Since turnover behavior is preceded by turnover intentions (Steel, and Ovale, 1984), the relationship between turnover intentions and turnover behavior has been widely studied (e.g., Mobley, 1977; Griffeth, Hom, and Gaertner, 2000; Cho, and Lewis, 2012; Sun, and Wang, 2017). The current study added to this growing body of literature by examining the role of derailment and productivity propensity as antecedents to turnover intentions.

The significant positive effect of derailment on intention to quit signifies the need for managers to assess whether their employees feel derailed. The findings suggest that the health implications of derailment such as, depression, anxiety, and perceived stress (Burrows, Hill, Ratner, and Fuller-Rowell, 2020), increase the likelihood of employees quitting their jobs. However, productivity propensity may dampen the

derailment-induced turnover intentions. Since derailment and productivity propensity are both psychological antecedents to intention to quit, the results of this study have significant managerial implications.

## **MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS**

A purposeful reduction in derailment and an increase in productivity propensity are two new tools that can be used by managers to attenuate employees' turnover intentions. Burrows et al. (2020, p. 595) argued that "opportunities to consider linkages between one's past and current selves might lead to a reduction in feelings" are associated with derailment. The authors found that writing about how one's past is connected to present resulted in a significant reduction in derailment. Consequently, employees should be prompted to find how their past experiences relate to their current selves.

Harris et al. (2014) found that among service workers, need for activity was significantly positively related to productivity propensity. Need for activity was conceptualized as helping customers achieve their goals, achieving own goals by satisfying customers, getting customers to talk about their needs, taking a problem-solving approach with customers, keeping the best interests of the customers in mind, and answering customers' questions correctly. These activities reflect the needs dimension of customer orientation (Brown, Mowen, Donovan, and Licata, 2002). Managers can encourage employees to engage in these activities and enhance their productivity propensity. Enhancing levels of productivity propensity may act as a buffer against turnover intentions induced by derailment.

## **LIMITATIONS AND DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH**

The cross-sectional design of this study requires mindful attention in the interpretation of the effects of derailment and productivity propensity on intention to quit. A longitudinal study is needed to draw causal conclusions. Further, four of the six studies used to develop the derailment scale had used undergraduate students as respondents. Students may not have experienced derailment in their real-life workplace as compared to their older counterparts. This could be the reason why two of the six items of the derailment scale needed to be deleted. Similarly, the PROPEN scale was developed to measure the productivity propensity of frontline employees. Although the usefulness of the scale in other contexts confirms external validity, the results of this study should be interpreted with caution.

Apart from utilizing a longitudinal study design, future research should investigate the potential moderators and mediators of the effects of derailment and productivity propensity on turnover intentions. For example, similar to the buffering effect of productivity propensity, person-organization fit may also mitigate the effect of derailment on intention to quit, whereas plateauing can bolster this effect.

Future research should also explore the relationship between derailment and future self-continuity, which is the degree to which a person identifies his or her future self as the same as his or her current self (Sokol, and Serper, 2020). Burrow et al. (2020, p. 587) argued that derailed individuals perceive that he or she has changed over time "in constitution and course." Apparently, an increase in derailment should accompany a decrease in future self-continuity. Since reliable and valid measures are available for both derailment and future self-continuity (see Sokol, and Serper, 2020), it would be interesting to assess whether, like productivity propensity, future self-continuity can also diminish intention to quit.

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## APPENDIX

### Productivity Propensity ( $\alpha = 0.83$ )

- I worked hard to increase my productivity on the job.
- I used my time wisely on the job.
- I prided myself on being very productive in my job activities.
- I hated to waste time on the job.

### Derailment ( $\alpha = 0.89$ )

- How I saw myself in the past is different from how I see myself now.
- I do not feel very connected to who I was in the past.
- I did not anticipate becoming the person that I currently am.
- I feel like I have become a different type of person over time.
- Sometimes I notice how different I am now from who I used to be.
- I am surprised at who I have become.

### Intention to Quit ( $\alpha = 0.94$ )

- There is a high probability that I will quit my job if I get another suitable offer.
- I occasionally think about leaving this organization.
- I intend to search for a position with another employer.
- I frequently scan the internet in search of alternative job opportunities.