The relationship between individual characteristics, attitudes, and career withdrawal

Abstract

This paper proposes that job withdrawal models may generalize to help better understand and predict career withdrawal. A sample of 141 real estate professionals were surveyed to test the proposed model of career withdrawal. Avoid goal orientation, full-time job status, career satisfaction, career disappointment, and career choice regret were regressed on three measures of career withdrawal. The results of the hierarchical regression were statistically significant, with the model explaining 50% of the variance in expressed career withdrawal intentions and behaviors. Implications of the findings for managers and researchers alike are provided as are recommendations for future research.

Key words: goal orientation, career withdrawal, career satisfaction
The relationship between individual characteristics, attitudes, and career withdrawal

Given the costs associated with recruitment and training, the interest in employee turnover in the workplace is not surprising. In order to better understand and predict employee turnover, study has expanded to include not simply turnover and intention to turnover, but rather a wide variety of employee withdrawal thoughts and behaviors including absence, tardiness, and lollygagging. The current study further expands the turnover and withdrawal literature to encompass career withdrawal. This paper proposes that job and work withdrawal models may generalize to help better understand and predict career withdrawal intentions and behaviors. With the lengthy educational requirements for many careers and widespread worker shortages in careers like nursing and engineering (AP, 2008; Morsch, 2006), the importance in the study of career withdrawal grows, as does the need for a comprehensive, yet parsimonious model to better understand and predict such behaviors and intentions. This study further adds to the literature by substituting the often used measures of individual characteristics (i.e. personality and core traits) with the avoid goal orientation measure in an attempt to further examine the individual employee characteristic antecedents central in predicting and understanding job attitudes and work behaviors.

Job Withdrawal

Turnover is a widely studied construct and research has tied turnover and intention to turnover with dozens of work and employee related variables (see Cotton & Tulle, 1986; Tett & Meyer, 1993). A theoretical model of job withdrawal has been proposed by Hulin and expanded by his colleagues and former students over the years (see Brett & Drasgow, 2002 for a complete review). In part, this model proposes that worker and job characteristics are antecedents of withdrawal behavior. This relationship is mediated by employee job attitudes and affective reactions. See Figure 1 adapted from Probst (2002). Kohler and Mathieu (1993) tested a similar model using a sample of 194 bus drivers. Their findings provide support for the belief that affective responses mediate the influence of job and worker characteristics on absence. A brief review of the model and related research findings follows.

Figure 1: Hulin's model of job withdrawal
Antecedents

Worker characteristics

The study of worker characteristics and their relationship to job satisfaction has been extensive. Conducting a meta-analysis, Judge and Bono (2001) studied individual core self-evaluations to determine their relationship to job satisfaction. Their findings indicate that self-esteem, internal locus of control, self-efficacy, and emotional stability are significant indicators of job satisfaction. In addition to these core traits, personality characteristics commonly labeled as the Big Five have also been studied to test their relationships with job satisfaction. Judge, Heller, and Mount (2002), conducting a meta-analysis, concluded that as a set, the Big Five personality dimensions were significantly related to job satisfaction. Similar conclusions were offered by Ones, Viswesvaran, and Dilchert (2005) and Cohrs, Abele, and Dette (2006). In an attempt to further narrow the personality and trait characteristics most important to the study of job satisfaction, Judge, Heller, and Klinger (2008) combined both the core trait self-evaluations and the Big Five personality dimensions. Separately both were found to be significant factors in job satisfaction. However, when combined, core traits were better predictors of job satisfaction then were the Big Five factors.

Job Characteristics

Job characteristics commonly include Hackmans and Oldham's core job characteristics of “task identity, skill variety, task significance, autonomy, and feedback” (1980; as cited in Judge, Bono, Erez, Locke, & Thoresen 2002, p. 61). Research has consistently found that these job dimensions are significantly related to job satisfaction (see Loher, Noe, Moeller, & Fitzgerald, 1985), although the relationships vary given individual demographic and personality factors (Seashore & Taber, 1975). In addition, Daniels (2000) found that job characteristics were also significantly related to many measures of affective well-being. Other job factors like part-time versus full-time status and union versus non-union status are also job characteristic antecedents to withdrawal behaviors and intentions (Probost, 2002).

Job Attitudes

Job Satisfaction is broadly defined as the positive or negative feelings one has towards his/her job (Ghazzawi, 2008). It is one of the primary job attitudes studied in respect to turnover, withdrawal intentions, and withdrawal behavior (see Locke, 1976). Findings have consistently found a negative relationship between job satisfaction and a wide group of withdrawal behaviors, although the strength of these negative relationships vary by the exact measure of the withdrawal behaviors (Hulin, 1990; Seashore & Taber, 1975). Thus, findings generally support the notion that dissatisfied employees are more likely to engage in thoughts and behaviors that fit within a general class of withdrawal behaviors and intentions.

Affective Reactions

Affective reactions toward work include positive feelings like comfort and pleasure and negative feelings like anger and tiredness (Daniels, 2000). In addition, commitment has also been measured as an affective reaction toward work. Although Harrison, Newman, and Roth (2008) considered organizational commitment under the job attitude classification, they found support for the proposal that commitment (along with job satisfaction) were significant predictors of a general theme of job and work withdrawal thoughts and behaviors.
Consequences - Job Withdrawal

Withdrawal encompasses the behaviors which distance employees from unfavorable work situations (Hulin, 1990). Early views of employee withdrawal focused almost entirely on turnover and the more readily measured, intention to turnover (see Steel & Ovalle, 1984). Yet the turnover process may begin much earlier for employees. Mobley (1977) and Mobley, Horner, and Hollingsworth (1978) suggested a more heuristic model of turnover that includes the thought processes, review of alternative job markets, and analysis of the costs associated with leaving one’s job prior to forming an intention to quit. In testing a similar proposition, Cheung (2004) found that many nurses reported thinking about leaving their professions for months or years and often began to prepare themselves for alternate careers through education and schedule changes before formally resigning. Theory also suggests that when turnover is not possible given market conditions (or other extraneous factors), other forms of withdrawal may be substituted as an employee response to unfavorable work situations (see Hulin, 1990 for a review). With these theories in mind, instead of focusing exclusively on turnover or intention to turnover, researchers have expanded their study to include other forms of withdrawal in the workplace. For example, while job withdrawal includes behaviors such as intention to quit, turnover, and retirement; work withdrawal includes behaviors such as tardiness, lollygagging, and task avoidance (Hanisch & Hulin, 1991). Independently any of these measures may not provide a complete picture of employee withdrawal behavior (see Hom, 2002). Employees may never be absent or tardy, but nevertheless be quite distant psychologically from their jobs and instead practice common task avoidance behaviors. Other employees may leave their positions due to health or family issues and not be psychologically distant or associated with an unfavorable work situation. In addition, some measures of withdrawal are mutually exclusive. If employees are absent, they cannot also be tardy or lollygagging. In light of the challenges with capturing a clear picture of withdrawal, Hom (2002) suggests that multiple measures be used to better assess the family of behaviors and thoughts associated with withdrawal. “A research strategy that studies aggregated measures of organizational withdrawal has the potential for greater understanding of the complex psychological process” (Hanisch, Hulin, & Toznowski, 1998, p. 476).

It is proposed that the general model of job and work withdrawal can be used to understand and predict career withdrawal. Necessary adjustments to the model and associated measurements of the constructs for the current study follow.

Career Withdrawal

Holland’s (1996) career typology postulates that individuals with a poor fit between their personality and their vocation are less likely to be satisfied with their careers, have increased thoughts of changing vocations, and experience an unstable career path with shifts between differing vocations. This fits well with the general model of withdrawal behavior, as Holland’s model suggests that the relationship between personality and career withdrawal thoughts and behaviors are mediated by career satisfaction. A similar model has also been suggested by London (1983) who studied the decisions individuals make in response to unfavorable career conditions. He postulates that individual characteristics combine with situational characteristics to impact career decisions. Nearly 40 different individual characteristics were considered including personality, self-esteem, goal flexibility, and fear of failure. The listings of situations and career decisions and behaviors were as extensive. The model proposed is understandably complex, given the wide variety of personality and other individual differences and situations which can combine to impact career decisions. However, it is very difficult to test such a comprehensive model. There are limits on the
length of surveys employees are willing to complete. It is simply not reasonable to expect respondents to answer surveys that include hundreds of items. While it may not be reasonable to test London’s complete model of career withdrawal in a single study, some of London’s individual and situational characteristics are accounted for in Figure 1 as antecedents.

Prior research on job and work withdrawal focused primarily on the Big Five and core personality traits as important antecedents of withdrawal. London (1983) also included these and goal issues as well as the fear of failure among his listing of individual characteristics. The goal orientation adopted by an individual establishes their mental framework which is used in decision making (Silver, Dwyer, & Alford, 2006). In fact, Fortunato and Goldblatt (2006) suggest that an even better measure of underlying individual characteristics may be a measure of goal orientation. “Goal orientation actually may predict employees’ job-related behavior and attitudes better than [the Big Five and related personality constructs]” (p. 2176). One component of goal orientation is the dimension of goal avoidance which seems a good fit with London’s goal issues and fear of failure. VandeWalle (1997) defines avoid goal orientation as a desire to avoid disapproval which may be forthcoming because of a show of low ability. Those individuals scoring high on the avoid goal orientation dimension are likely to avoid tasks that have the potential to demonstrate poor performance. Instead of trying with a risk of failing, high avoid goal orientation individuals would rather not try at all. Since prior research seems to have fully covered the impact of the Big Five and core trait characteristics on job attitudes and affects, continuing to include the same measures does not allow for continued theory development. In addition, unlike the Big Five and core traits, research suggests that goal orientation can be modified through training and feedback (VandeWalle, Brown, Cron, & Slocum, 1999). If goal orientation is found to be a significant antecedent in withdrawal behaviors and intentions, employers could provide training to help employees shift their goal orientations to reduce withdrawal intentions. This is especially helpful for job classifications at risk of worker shortages. As such, this study includes avoid goal orientation as an antecedent to career withdrawal in place of traditional personality and trait measures.

Only one measure of job characteristic is considered in this study, that of full-time/part-time status. Additional measure of job characteristics include items like skill variety, task identity, and task significance. It is proposed that as long as the subjects included in a study share the same or similar jobs, these measures of job characteristics should also be similar. In addition, while there may be individual differences in terms of direct supervision and thus autonomy and feedback, these too are likely to be similar within the same workgroup and organization as policy and procedures tend to be established on a company-wide basis.

Traditional theories linking job satisfaction and organizational commitment to withdrawal intentions may not be a good fit for those employed in specialized careers because many of those constructs are specifically tied to a particular organization and not to the career choice in general. Thus, groups of attitudes proposed in this study have been modified slightly to better reflect the issue of career attitude and affect. Career satisfaction has replaced job satisfaction and career disappointment and career choice regret are proposed as affective measures.

In keeping with the suggestions outlined above for using composite measures of withdrawal, multiple withdrawal thoughts and intentions have been measured. These include thoughts of leaving the profession, intentions to maintain professional licensure, and the time spent working outside of their current profession.

Given the modifications outlined above, the following model is proposed.
Figure 2: Proposed Model of Career Withdrawal

Antecedents
- Individual Characteristics: Avoid Goal Orientation
- Job Characteristics: Full-time Status

Job Attitudes:
- Career Satisfaction

Affective Reactions:
- Career Disappointment, Career Choice Regret

Consequences
- Career Withdrawal: Keep, Expand, Outside

Methodology

Procedures

Email messages were sent to all employees of one large real estate firm (N = 200) directing them to an online version of the survey. In addition, three branch offices were visited in person by a research assistant who distributed paper surveys to those present at the time.

Sample

Respondents were licensed real estate agents, brokers, or associate brokers in the Southeast region of Florida, US. A total of 141 completed surveys were received, 62% female and 38% male, with an average age of 46 years (s.d. = 13.21). Respondents reported that they had held their license for 9 years (mean = 9.43; s.d. 7.61) and most considered real estate a full-time position (75%).

Measures

Avoid Goal Orientation. Avoid goal orientation was measured by the average of a four item avoid goal orientation scale developed by VandeWalle (1997). All items were measured on a five point scale from 1 'strongly disagree' to 5 'strongly agree'. Sample items include “I prefer to avoid situations at work where I might perform poorly” and “I’m concerned about taking on a task at work if my performance would reveal that I had a low ability”. Higher scores are an indication of a stronger avoid goal orientation. VandeWalle reported an internal reliability measure of .88. Cronbach’s alpha for this sample was somewhat lower at .73.

Career Disappointment. Career disappointment was measured as a single item (“I am disappointed in how things are going for me in the real estate profession right now”) measured on a five point scale from 1 'strongly disagree' to 5 'strongly agree'. Higher scores are an indication of greater reported disappointment for a career in real estate.

Career Satisfaction. Satisfaction with choice of careers was measured as the average of a three item scale measured from 1 'very dissatisfied' to 5 'very satisfied'. Higher scores are an indication of greater satisfaction with a career in real estate. The internal reliability measure for this scale was
satisfactory (alpha = .83). Sample items include "On the whole, how satisfied are you with your present job in real estate when you consider the expectations you had when you first started?" and "How satisfied are you with the type of tasks you perform as a real estate professional?"

Career Choice Regret. Career choice regret was measured as a single item ("If I had it to do over again, I likely would not have entered the real estate profession") measured on a five point scale from 1 'strongly disagree' to 5 'strongly agree'. Higher scores are an indication of greater reported regret for the selection of a career in real estate.

Career Withdrawal. Career withdrawal was measured as three independent items. Respondents were asked if they expected to keep their license active, if they thought often about expanding their non-real estate dealings, and how much time they spent on work outside of real estate (labeled keep, expand, and outside respectively). All items were measured on a five point scale from 1 'strongly disagree' to 5 'strongly agree'. Higher scores are an indication of greater career withdrawal. In keeping with prior research recommendations, we consider these three items a composite measure of withdrawal and not a single construct.

Demographics. Respondents reported their age, tenure, full-time/part-time status, and job classification.

Results

Table 1 displays the descriptive statistics and intercorrelations for all study variables. No significant differences were found for any of the study variables based on gender.

Table 1
Intercorrelations and Descriptive Statistics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>s.d.</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>7</th>
<th>8</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Avoid Goal Orientation</td>
<td>3.60</td>
<td>1.71</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Career Disappointment</td>
<td>2.85</td>
<td>1.17</td>
<td>.19</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Career Satisfaction</td>
<td>3.86</td>
<td>0.82</td>
<td>-.01</td>
<td>-.42</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Keep</td>
<td>2.34</td>
<td>1.17</td>
<td>.25</td>
<td>.38</td>
<td>-.31</td>
<td>.42</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>6. Expand</td>
<td>3.05</td>
<td>1.16</td>
<td>.13</td>
<td>.35</td>
<td>-.26</td>
<td>.19</td>
<td>.25</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Outside</td>
<td>2.42</td>
<td>1.22</td>
<td>.16</td>
<td>.41</td>
<td>-.38</td>
<td>.40</td>
<td>.43</td>
<td>.30</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Tenure</td>
<td>9.43</td>
<td>7.61</td>
<td>-.07</td>
<td>.15</td>
<td>.12</td>
<td>-.02</td>
<td>-.06</td>
<td>-.03</td>
<td>-.13</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Age</td>
<td>45.98</td>
<td>13.21</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>.15</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>-.03</td>
<td>-.01</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>.58</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Because of missing data, n ranges from 124 to 141; *p < 0.05; **p < 0.01.

It was proposed that the general model of job and work withdrawal could be modified to also explain career withdrawal. In addition, it was also proposed that avoid goal orientation would be an
adequate explanatory individual characteristic in the model. The data were tested using a hierarchical regression formula, entering the variables in order to match the model proposed in Figure 2. The results of the regression support the proposal, with the complete model accounting for 50% of the variance in reported intentions towards career withdrawal thoughts and behaviors (adjusted $R^2 = 50$), see Table 2.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>SE</th>
<th>Beta</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>$R^2$</th>
<th>Adj $R^2$</th>
<th>Change $R^2$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Avoid Goal</td>
<td>0.23</td>
<td>0.15</td>
<td>0.10</td>
<td>4.69*</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Full-time$^a$</td>
<td>-1.98</td>
<td>0.40</td>
<td>-0.33</td>
<td>21.25**</td>
<td>.26</td>
<td>.25</td>
<td>.22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Career Satisfaction</td>
<td>-0.60</td>
<td>0.23</td>
<td>-0.18</td>
<td>22.26**</td>
<td>.36</td>
<td>.34</td>
<td>.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Career Disappointment</td>
<td>0.68</td>
<td>0.16</td>
<td>0.30</td>
<td>25.74**</td>
<td>.52</td>
<td>.50</td>
<td>.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Career Choice Regret</td>
<td>0.59</td>
<td>0.15</td>
<td>0.26</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

$^a$ Full-time is a dummy variable with part-time coded zero; *$p < 0.05$; **$p < 0.01$; $n = 123$.

Since individual characteristics are considered antecedents to career withdrawal, avoid goal orientation was entered in the equation first. Although accounting for only a small proportion of the variance (adjusted $R^2 = .03$) explained by the complete model, it nonetheless was statistically significant ($F = 4.69; p < .05$). The findings indicate that employees with stronger tendencies toward an avoid goal orientation, are more likely to also indicate a greater likelihood of withdrawing from a career in real estate.

Full time status was also considered an antecedent of career withdrawal. As such, it was entered in the second step. The results indicate that full-time status was a significant predictor of career withdrawal ($F = 21.25; p < .01$), accounting for an additional .22 of the variance in expressed withdrawal behaviors. The results indicate that full-time employees express fewer intentions to withdraw from a career in real estate than do individuals employed part-time in the field.

Career satisfaction was proposed to mediate the relationship between individual and job characteristics and career withdrawal. Entered third in the equation, career satisfaction was found to be a significant mediator ($F = 22.26; p < .01$), accounting for an additional .10 of the variance in expressed withdrawal behavior. Employees who are less satisfied with their careers are more likely to indicate an expressed intention to withdraw from their careers.

Career disappointment and career choice regret, measures of affective reactions, were also proposed to mediate the relationship between individual and job characteristics and career withdrawal. Entered fourth in the equation, they were found to be significant mediators ($F = 25.74; p < .01$), accounting for an additional .16 of the variance in expressed withdrawal behavior. Employees with greater levels of reported career disappointment and greater levels of reported career choice regret were more likely to report greater expressed withdrawal thoughts and behaviors.

Discussion

Individual employee characteristics, combined with job requirements and attitudes are of interest to managers and researchers alike if they can be used to predict and understand the construct of career
withdrawal intentions and behaviors. This study included avoid goal orientation as the measure of individual characteristic antecedent to career withdrawal intentions and behaviors. Given the public nature of real estate sales, the success level of real estate professionals tends to be quite open to co-workers and customers alike. Thus, under-performing employees may be unable to hide their poor performances, which may make the avoid goal orientation an even stronger predictor for career withdrawal for this particular group. Prior research (Fortunato & Goldblatt, 2006) suggested that goal orientation may be a better predictor of job-related behaviors than core personality traits or the Big Five. Our results did not find support for that proposition. Although significantly related, avoid goal orientation explained only a very small part of the overall model and its impact was greatly reduced once other factors were entered into the equation. This was disappointing given research support for the notion that goal orientation can be shifted through training and feedback. Had the results offered stronger support for the avoid goal orientation as an individual characteristic antecedent, it would have provided employers with a possible means for modifying withdrawal intentions and behavior. Core personality traits and the Big Five dimensions as antecedents do not provide for such training and feedback influence by employers for current employees. Avoid goal orientation may be even less likely to be a significant individual characteristic for expressed intentions for career withdrawal for employees employed in fields without an open system of reporting performance. While individual supervisors may be aware of poor performance, it is unlikely that poor performance would be widely publicized in most non-sales career fields. It may be that other measures of goal orientation (learning and prove) would be better predictors of withdrawal behavior than the avoid dimension. Future research should consider those dimensions of goal orientation as possible individual characteristic antecedents of career withdrawal intentions and behavior.

This study included full-time status as the job characteristic antecedent to career withdrawal intentions and behavior. The findings suggest that this job characteristic was a significant factor in the model. However, the potential measures for other types of job characteristics is quite great. The sample tested in this study had the advantage of including only one job type. Holding potential differences in job characteristics constant allowed for a more parsimonious model without the need for an expanded survey. Although had additional job characteristics been measured beyond full-time status, the variance in reported career withdrawal explained may have been increased. Future researchers may wish to include additional measures of job characteristics as even those holding the same job type may experience variance in their reported levels of autonomy and feedback even if the task identity, skill variety, and task significance remained constant.

Past research has overwhelmingly supported the importance of job satisfaction as a mediator for job withdrawal intentions and behaviors. The finding that this relationship holds for career satisfaction and career withdrawal is important, as the ability of management theory and research to generalize to a wide variety of circumstances is of upmost importance. Theory and research that has only a limited scope is of less value in our understanding of employee attitude and work behaviors. The findings of this study offer very strong support that the affective reactions of career disappointment and career choice regret are mediators in the relationship between individual and job characteristic antecedents and career withdrawal intentions and behaviors. Affective reactions such as these are easily measured and are likely to come quite early in the long process of withdrawal postulated by Mobley and his colleagues.

As with all research, this study does have some limitations. First, all the data were collected as self-report measures and have the potential for respondent error. Using an anonymous survey does lessen this effect somewhat, however. In addition, there is also the potential for non-response error without a 100% response rate. While efforts were made to increase participation with reminder emails and one follow-up visit to three branch offices, some employees still elected not to participate. It may be that non-respondents have significantly different views than respondents.
Overall, the results of this study offer strong support for the use of the general model of job and work withdrawal to understand and predict career withdrawal behaviors. As a rather simple model, it should be easily testable in a wide variety of fields in order to test its ability to generalize across situations and vocations.

References


