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How does client embeddedness fit into a theory of turnover?

Two models tested and an existing theory extended

Gerry Treuren

Centre for HRM, School of Management, University of South Australia Business School, Adelaide, Australia

Email: gerry.treuren@unisa.edu.au

Treuren and Frankish's (in press) client embeddedness construct adds a new perspective on why people stay in unpleasant, poorly remunerated or frustrating roles. This paper sketches how client embeddedness might fit into the existing theory of Job Embeddedness Theory and into the more traditional dissatisfaction-based account of turnover, before testing these models. The paper presents several logics for why client embeddedness may act to attach an employee to a job or organisation they dislike, drawing on the Job Characteristics Model, Social Identity Theory and Social Exchange literatures.

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TWO MODELS TESTED AND AN EXISTING THEORY EXTENDED

ABSTRACT

Treuren and Frankish's (in press) client embeddedness construct adds a new perspective on why people stay in unpleasant, poorly remunerated or frustrating roles. This paper sketches how client embeddedness might fit into the existing theory of Job Embeddedness Theory and into the more traditional dissatisfaction-based account of turnover, before testing these models. The paper presents several logics for why client embeddedness may act to attach an employee to a job or organisation they dislike, drawing on the Job Characteristics Model, Social Identity Theory and Social Exchange literatures.

Keywords: retention, satisfaction, employee engagement, attitudes, commitment, loyalty

Treuren and Frankish (in press) has demonstrated that client embeddedness – the attachment that employees may have towards the beneficiaries of their labours – provides a partial explanation of why dissatisfied employees may remain employed in their jobs. In that paper, client embeddedness was found to moderate the relationship between an employee's pay dissatisfaction and their leaving intention. Dissatisfied employees with high levels of client embeddedness were found to be less likely to want to leave than equally dissatisfied employees with lower levels of client embeddedness.

This paper seeks to sketch how the concept of client embeddedness might, first, fit into the existing theory of Job Embeddedness Theory initially proposed by Mitchell, Holtom, Lee, Sablynski and Erez (2001). The client embeddedness concept will then be compared against an affect-based model of employee turnover. The paper then sketches a rationale for why the effects currently categorised as client embeddedness might exist, drawing on the Job Characteristics Model, Social Identity Theory and Social Exchange literatures.

The contribution made by this paper is of several types. First, the paper extends the current knowledge about the character and scope of client embeddedness. It sketches out the relationship of client embeddedness and job embeddedness, and proposes several ways in which it might operate to increase employee attachment. Further, it tests whether client embeddedness integrates into a

dissatisfaction based theory of turnover. Second, the paper provides further validity to a framework that potentially offers a new focus for employer people management practices. The existence of client embeddedness points to a specific direction for management in the design of selection, training and performance management systems aimed at legitimating and cultivating an employee's relationship with their clients.

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CLIENT EMBEDDEDNESS AS A COMPONENT

OF EMPLOYEE EMBEDDEDNESS

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The evolution of turnover theory

The early JET writers conceptualised job embeddedness in terms of Lewin's (1964) field theory. Lewin proposed that a person lived within a force field called a 'life space.' This 'life space' is made up of the subjective assessments they make to the collage of forces surrounding them. These forces range from tangible (economic, physical, biological) through to the intangible (such as emotive, cognitive, aesthetic, social, metaphysical) dimensions. These forces act on the person, who interprets the significance of these forces, identifies opportunities and challenges, and responds accordingly.

The turnover literature had long struggled with the implications of a theory of turnover that relied primarily on affect. Employees, the affect-based theorists assumed, started to think about leaving their jobs when the job lost its desirability (March and Simon, 1958). As the job lost its appeal, the employee would start to look for alternative employment. Once a suitable job was found, the employee would leave. Until an employee had made their mind to leave, the employee's intention to leave was understood as negatively correlated to their satisfaction with the role, and positively correlated to the availability of job alternatives.

Such an account of employee turnover seemed intuitively plausible, reflecting an implicit model of the autonomy of an employee's freedom of choice.

But this theory struggled with several key questions unanswered. How and when did an employee recognise and acknowledge dissatisfaction? What happens in the black boxes between the various steps? This prompted the work of at least a generation of turnover researchers, who sought increasingly detailed accounts of the micro-decisions between mounting dissatisfaction and the

decision to leave (Holtom, Mitchell, Lee & Eberly, 2008). Troubled by the difficulty in reliably predicting turnover intention and actual leaving (Allen, Bryant, & Vardaman, 2010; Griffeth, Hom & Gaertner, 2000), this literature examined additional mechanisms to explain the processes between the various stages (Russell, 2013). Porter and Steers (1973) and Mobley (1977) were the most important contributors in the campaign to resolve this problem (Holtom et al, 2008).

The Unfolding Theory of Turnover represented a substantial redirection of the literature away from the problems of the dissatisfaction-job availability model (Lee & Mitchell, 1994). Although this approach recognised that turnover could occur as a result of dissatisfaction, it shifted the emphasis to the new notion of a 'shock.' A shock was an event − from within or from outside the organisation, expected or unexpected, that might be perceived by the employee as having positive, neutral or negative implication − prompting the employee to reconsider their ongoing employment within the organisation. These researchers explained this process in terms of image theory (Beach, 1993). A shock prompts the employee to compare the reality of their post-shock work life with their internalised conception of themselves and their life choices – their *image*. This image is understood to have three dimensions – how the world should be, how they imagine their future should be, and how they think they will achieve that future goal. A shock violates that image and prompts a reaction. The reaction may be to stay, to move within the organisation or to leave the organisation. Unfolding Theory research quickly found that shock-based turnover was more likely to occur than dissatisfaction based turnover (Kulik, Treuren & Bordia, 2012).

Job Embeddedness Theory – a solution to a theoretical problem.

However, this still left a major question unanswered: why would a shock or dissatisfaction prompt an employee to leave, while another, also experiencing the same circumstances, stayed? Researchers involved with the UFT proposed a new framework that would provide an explanation for this phenomenon. For these researchers, the leaving and staying employee differed in terms of their connectedness − embeddedness − to the organisation. Employees who were more embedded were more likely to stay than less embedded employees.

The initial formulation of JET held that an employee's life space could be described in terms of an employee's attachment to their job and organisation; and to their life out of work, such as their

family and work. The employee's embeddedness at work could be understood in terms of employee

fit, their links to other employees, work processes and the organisation; and their perceived

opportunity cost of leaving. An employee was understood to have attachments to their family, their

community and life out of work. These attachments could act, in different circumstances, as yet

unclarified in the literature, as moderator of employee shock and dissatisfaction, and as factor

determining employee retention.

Subsequent JET theorising has proposed two new dimensions of embeddedness. Ramesh and

Gelfand (2010) have demonstrated that family embeddedness can explain more of the employee's

intention to leave, in some cultural contexts, than the Lee and Mitchell's initial formulation suggested.

Other researchers, such as Ng and Feldman (2007) and Adams, Webster, and Buyarski (2010) have

proposed an additional source of embeddedness: an employee's attachment to their career, profession

and embeddedness.

Client embeddedness is based on a similar and simple insight. An employee's relationship

with their clients − here defined as the beneficiary of their work – can create a form of attachment to

the organisation. This attachment, in terms of Lewin's field theory, can act as a force constraining or

propelling employee choices. As Treuren and Frankish (in press) have demonstrated, this attachment

can act to bind the employee to the organisation, despite the existence of dissatisfaction with aspects

of the job or the organisation. As the employee's relationship with the client is dependent on

continued employment by the organisation, client embeddedness acts as a barrier to leaving the

organisation. Figure 1 presents the extended Job Embeddedness Theory as implied by family

embeddedness, occupational, professional and career embeddedness, as well as client embeddedness.

Figure 1

The question arises: is client embeddedness merely a component of job embeddedness or is it a form

of embeddedness additional to that of job embeddedness? Figure 1 represents client embeddedness as

overlapping with on- and off-the-job embeddedness. We will examine whether client embeddedness

explains variance in addition to that predicted by on- and off-the job embeddedness.

Hypothesis 1. Client embeddedness contributes to the prediction of intention to leave over and beyond that predicted by on-and off-the-job embeddedness.

CLIENT EMBEDDEDNESS AND AFFECT-BASED MODELS OF TURNOVER

How would client embeddedness fit within an affect-based model of turnover within the March and Simon (1958) tradition of turnover research? As noted earlier, the pre-UFT and JET account of turnover held turnover to be a function of employee satisfaction and the availability of job alternatives. Employee dissatisfaction triggers the turnover process. An employee's positive relationship with their clients may lead to increased employee satisfaction, which in turn leads to a lower intention to leave, and thus a lower likelihood of a turnover decision. Here it is proposed that an employee's client relationship is mediated by satisfaction resulting in reduced turnover intention and behaviour.

This mediation, however, is not likely to be complete. Employee satisfaction relates to the employee's response to the job and the organisation. In a perfectly mediated case, the employee's experience would directly and entirely influence their satisfaction with their employer and the job. However, as Treuren and Frankish (in press) demonstrated, the relationship between an employee and their clients can potentially give rise to a form of adhesion to the organisation that is primarily related to the employee's sense of responsibility to the client, and unrelated to the organisation. An employee may be dissatisfied with the job, and dissatisfied with their employer, but still feel obliged to remain employed in order to maintain their relationship with their clients. Although the client-employee relationship exists in dependence on the job and the organisation, the attachment and the obligations that may arise from the job may be independent to what the employee thinks and feels about the job and the employing organisation. Thus, satisfaction is only likely to *partially* mediate the client-embeddedness and turnover intention relationship. Figure 2 sketches this set of relationships.

Figure 2

Hypothesis 2. Client embeddedness is partially mediated by employee satisfaction in predicting leaving intention.

WHY MIGHT CLIENT EMBEDDEDNESS HAVE AN EFFECT, ANYWAY?

This section briefly overviewsseveral literatures that suggest the client-employee relationship can lead, directly or indirectly, to greater employee adhesion to the organization. In each case, the greater the employee-client relationship, the lower the intention to leave.

A Job Characteristics Model explanation.

In this literature, an employee's motivation, commitment and satisfaction is a function of five factors: skill variety. task identity, task significance, autonomy and feedback, with this relationship moderated by the employee's needs for growth (Hackman & Oldham, 1975). Assuming that an employee's client relationship is positively associated with their assessment of the significance of their work, it is proposed that an employee with a strong, close relationship with their clients is likely to have a higher level of attachment to the organisation as a result, than an employee with a lower level of client attachment who does not see the significance of their work as importantly. Grant (2008), for example, found that the turnover rates of employees doing an unpleasant job – making donation request calls in a university call centre – declined substantially when employees became aware of the social importance of their work. This effect was much stronger for employees who had been introduced to the beneficiaries of their fundraising efforts.

A social identity theory explanation.

An alternative but not contradictory explanation of the effect reported by Grant (2008) is that a positive employee-client relationship acts to reframe the employee's perception of the meaning of the work, and their role in doing it. The 'dirty work' literature has highlighted the ways that people doing justify doing work they or others perceive to be unpleasant or ethically suspect. One strategy involves 'reframing' the meaning of the work, creating justifications and a rationale for their continued employment in the field (Ashforth, Kreiner, Clark and Fugate, 2007). A warm, strong client-employee relationship is likely to reveal to the employee the inherent value in their work, enabling them to transcend some of the negative feelings they have towards their job, and to legitimise their continued involvement in the work (Dutton, Roberts and Bednar, 2010). A growing, warm relationship between an employee and clients can assist in the construction of a positive interpretation of the value of their work, and may act to neutralise negative aspects of the job. Viewed from the perspective of the

Conservation of Resources Theory (Hobfoll, 1989) and Job Demand-Resources Model (Demerouti, Bakker, Nachreiner & Schaufeli, 2001), this positive meaning can lead to a more positive work identity, that may act to dampen adverse reactions to other, more negative aspects of work, leading to a reduced intention to leave.

A social exchange theory explanation.

An implication of social exchange theory (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005; Gouldner, 1960; Settoon, Bennett and Liden, 1996) is that a positive employee-client relationship may give rise to an employee desire to maintain that relationship, as the employee may seek to continue to reciprocate the benefits of that relationship. As leaving may prevent the continuation of that relationship, the employee may be less likely to choose to leave. Thus, the client relationship can evolve into a barrier to exit, dampening turnover intention.

METHOD

Participants

The sample was drawn from the personal care employees of a not-for-profit organisation providing support services in the homes of people with disabilities. In late 2008 a postcard announcing the survey was mailed to the participant's home address two weeks prior to the mailing of a survey package. This package contained a mail-merged personalised letter from the organisation's HR manager encouraging respondents to complete the survey, an information sheet, the survey, a voucher from a sponsor of the charity for a discount meal at a takeaway food chain, a reply paid envelope and the materials needed to claim the incentive. Participants were offered a $15 voucher redeemable at a Coles/Myer outlet. A follow up survey package was sent three weeks later to participants who had not already returned the survey. Usable responses were received from 153 employees, out of a personal care workforce of 302, representing a net response rate of 50.6%. Twelve packages were returned to sender.

The sample reflected the organisation's and industry's gender distribution, with females constituting 81% of the sample. The average employee was between 45 and 49 years of age (SD=10 years), had worked for the employer for 4.25 years (SD=3.75 years) and had worked in the personal care sector for an average 7.07 years (SD=6.83yrs).

Measures

The surveys requested that respondents report on a variety of personal characteristics and demographic information.

Intention to leave: Employee turnover intention was measured using a three-item scale derived from Abrams, Ando and Hinkle (1998). Responses were recorded using a seven-point Likert scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree).

Job satisfaction: Overall satisfaction was measured using Cammann, Fichmann, Jenkins and Klesh (1983)'s 3-item scale. The unweighted mean of the three items represent the final job satisfaction score.

*Client embeddedness***:** This paper measured client embeddedness by amending the seven item global job embeddedness scale developed by Crossley, Bennett, Jex and Burnfield (2007). The Crossley et al (2007) scale was amended by replacing references to the respondent's job and organisation with 'clients'. The amended scale was composed from the following items: 'I feel attached to my clients'; 'It would be difficult for me to leave my clients'; 'I'm too caught up with my clients to leave'; 'I feel tied to my clients'; 'I simply could not leave my clients'; 'It would be easy for me to leave my clients'; 'I am tightly connected to my clients.'

*Job embeddedness***:** In this paper on-and off-the- job embeddedness was measured using the scales specified in Mitchell et al (2001). As these scales used a combination of continuous and dichotomous items we took the average of the z-scores of the items within those scales, following the approach of Mitchell et al (2001) and Lee et al (2004). As these scales are composite scales, it is unlikely that scale will demonstrate the usual scale reliability (Zhang et al, 2012).

RESULTS

The descriptive statistics for the sample are reported in Table 1.

Table 1

The first hypothesis proposed that client embeddedness may contribute additional variance beyond that predicted by on-and off-the job embeddedness. This was tested through by a two-step

hierarchical regression. The first step examined whether on- and off-the-job embeddedness predicted employee intention to leave, and if so, what proportion of variance might be predicted. The second step added client embeddedness to determine if additional variance was explained by the additional variable.

In the first stage only on-the-job embeddedness predicted intention to leave (β = -.42, p < .001). Off-the job embeddedness was not a statistically significant predictor of intention to leave (β = -.06, p>.05). Overall, this model predicted 20 % of leaving intention variance. Client embeddedness was added in the second stage, explaining an additional 2% of turnover intention variance (β = -.15, p < .05) ($\Delta F (1, 143) = 4.45$, $\Delta R^2 = .02$, p < .05). Overall, the two-stage model predicted 22 % of leaving intention variance ($F (3, 148) = 13.75$, p < .001). Accordingly, Hypothesis 1 was supported.

The second hypothesis proposed that client embeddedness might be partially mediated by employee satisfaction in predicting intention to leave. This was tested by identifying whether a statistically significant indirect effect exists. Using Shrout and Bolger's (2002) method as outlined by Frazier, Tix and Barron (2004), the effect of the independent variable on the mediator was estimated, with the coefficients determined through bootstrap sampling, before estimating the effect of the mediator on the dependent variable, and the independent variable on the dependent variable. This method was developed in recognition of the low levels of statistical power inherent in the Baron and Kenny (1986) approach to mediation detection, with its ensuing risk of Type 1 error (Mackinnon, 2008; Preacher & Hayes, 2008).

This regression was undertaken using Mplus 5.23, drawing 5000 bootstrap samples. Client embeddedness was found to have no statistically significant relationship with employee satisfaction (β = -.004, p >.05). This was confirmed by the estimation of bias-corrected 95% confidence interval around this estimate (lower = -0.19, upper = .019). Thus, the mediator was unaffected by the independent variable. As a result, there was no effect to be mediated. Hypothesis 2 was not supported.

DISCUSSION

This paper has several purposes. The first purpose was to provide an outline of how client embeddedness might fit into the broader theory of Job Embeddedness. This paper locates client

embeddedness into two aspects of Job Embeddedness Theory: the origins of JET in Lewin's field theory and the current exploration of additional dimension of employee attachment. From the perspective of Lewin's theorising, client embeddedness is another set of opportunities and constraints that effect the employee within their life space, and supplements the already established life space forces of on-and off-the-job embeddedness. This reflects the current exploration of the scope of the embeddedness concept to included family embeddedness and career and occupational embeddedness.

The second purpose is to test aspects of the statistical properties of client embeddedness. Is client embeddedness merely an aspect of job embeddedness, or is it an additional aspect of employee embeddedness? Or, does a satisfaction-based explanation account for the impact of client embeddedness on turnover intention? This paper finds that client embeddedness does explain additional variance: on- and off-the-job embeddedness explains 20% of leaving intention variance; client embeddedness contributes 2% of additional variance. For these respondents, employee satisfaction – measured based on job and organisational satisfaction – is not statistically significantly related to employee client embeddedness.

The third purpose of the paper is to sketch why client embeddedness might exist. Drawing on arguments in the job characteristics model, social identity theory, social exchange theory literature, several rationales for why the employee-client relationship may have adhesive effect between the employee and the organisation. Later research can examine which of these approaches most accurately describes how client embeddedness arises and the conditions in which it applies.

These findings make a useful contribution. Client embeddedness predicts employee turnover intention beyond that predicted by on- and off-the-job embeddedness. Client embeddedness does not, *prima facie*, have a statistically significant relationship with employee satisfaction, suggesting that client embeddedness has a direct impact on turnover intention.

LIMITATIONS OF THIS PAPER AND FURTHER RESEARCH

The first limitation is that, like much research in management and the social sciences, it relies on data collected at one point in time – cross-sectional data – to make inferences about how people behave over time (Ployhart and Vandenburg, 2010). Longitudinal studies would provide other benefits. Repeat studies are needed to clarify how the relationships between client embeddedness and

turnover evolve over time. Does client embeddedness evolve over time as a result of the work and training? Does it act like a state or a trait? Multi-level studies are needed to clarify whether the impact of client embeddedness is limited only to this organization, to disability services, or whether it exists more broadly.

Secondly, the data is based on self-reported perceptual data. The same person – the respondent – assesses their level of pay satisfaction, client embeddedness and intention to leave, at the same point in time. This enables the possibility of common method, self-service and social desirability biases. In particular, client embeddedness may be inflated because of social desirability bias (Nederhof, 1985). Because of the value-laden questions that make up the client embeddedness scale, it is quite possible that the actual level of employee attachment to their charges may be over-stated or distorted (King and Bruner, 2000). Subsequent research will need to control for the effect of social desirability bias. Subsequent data collections should seek independent evaluations of the level of client embeddedness: would client embeddedness effect exist if independent ratings (such as supervisor, peer or client) of client embeddedness are also used?

Third, further research is needed to work out the impact of client embeddedness on actual turnover. As noted earlier, although intention to leave is the single best measure of actual leaving, the unfolding theory of turnover has highlighted the role of shock-based turnover. In this paper, client embeddedness appears to explain only an additional 2% of turnover intention variance, beyond that predicted by on- and off-the-job embeddedness.

CONCLUSION

This paper has proposed and tested a new form of employee embeddedness that simultaneously develops JET and points to a new type of HR practice for not-for-profit organizations. The paper provides some evidence that client embeddedness exists and has an effect on employee intention to leave, directly and through its moderating effect on employee pay satisfaction. Despite this, these conclusions are only tentative. The paper has several limitations, and further research is needed to determine the generality of the findings.

This paper makes three sets of contributions to the broader literature. First, the paper identifies a possible explanation for why poorly paid employees, undertaking often unpleasant work

may remain employed with an organization. Second, this paper extends the JET by proposing a new dimension of embeddedness, that supplements the existing understanding of employee embeddedness. Third, although the organizational behaviour literature has long understood that a positive relationship between an employee and their clients might lead to a wide variety of beneficial outcomes, this paper proposes a way of integrating these effects into a model of turnover. By using a global measure of the strength of the employee-client relationship we can track how different levels of the relationship impact on the employee's turnover thoughts and process. Finally, the findings of this paper suggests that not-for-profit organizations, especially those with high client involvement, could develop recruitment practices that seek employee propensity to develop harmonious, respectful and mutually beneficial relationships with their clients and develop retention practices that reward and cultivate client-centred employee engagement. Such practices will develop employee embeddedness and thus employee retention.

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Table 1

Descriptive statistics

	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5
1. Intention to Leave	3.72	1.77	[.76]				
2. Client embeddedness	4.34	1.37	-0.22**	[.89]			
3. Satisfaction	5.41	1.19	-.55**	-0.01	[.84]		
4. On-the-Job embeddedness (z)	0.00	0.54	-.44**	.16*	.67**	[.88]	
5. Off-the-Job embeddedness (z)	0.00	0.53	-.20*	.11	.18*	.34**	[.33]

Notes: *p<.05; **p<.01; ***p<.001; Cronbach's alpha score is reported on the diagonal
[a] Measured as a z-score; other measures scored 1(low) -7 (high)

Figure 1

An extended Job Embeddedness Theory model
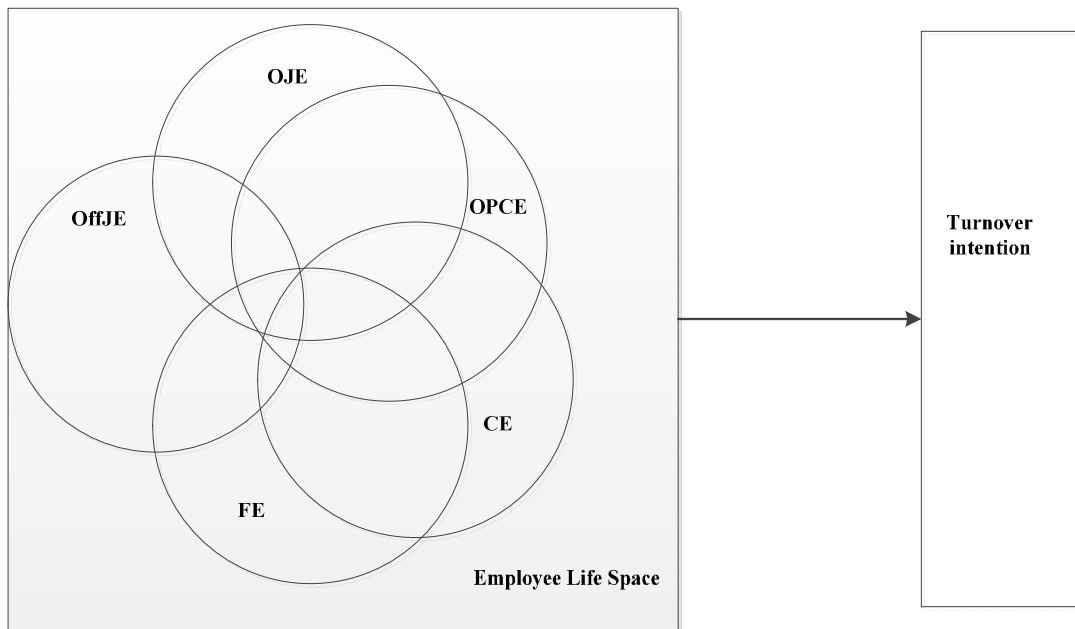
Note: OJE: On-the-job embeddedness; OffJE: Off-the-job embeddedness; FE: Family embeddedness; OPCE: occupational, professional, career embeddedness; CE: Client embeddedness

Figure 2

A client-embeddedness satisfaction-based model of turnover