JOB EMBEDDEDNESS AND TURNOVER: AN EMPIRICAL TEST
WITH DISPOSITIONAL ANTECEDENTS

Yuanyuan Gong*
Department of Management, The Chinese University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong
Email: yygong@baf.msmail.cuhk.edu.hk

Irene H. S. Chow
Department of Management, The Chinese University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong
Email: irene@baf.msmail.cuhk.edu.hk

Weiwen Li
Department of Management, The Chinese University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong
Email: liweiwen@baf.msmail.cuhk.edu.hk
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ABSTRACT

When job embeddedness was developed, it was framed as a situational construct. As personality leads different individuals to experience the same life events in a more positive or negative fashion (Magnus, Diener, Fujita, & Pavot, 1993), certain people might also be inclined to feel more attached to an organization than others. This study explores whether employees with certain personality traits are less likely to leave their organization because of the job embeddedness they have developed.

Data were collected from 357 employees various industries through online surveys in China. Structure Equation Modeling was employed to test the hypotheses. Results showed that on-the-job embeddedness mediates the influences of Neuroticism, Extraversion and Openness for Experience on turnover intention. Possible explanations were given and discussions were made on the findings as well as theoretical and practical implications.

Keywords: big five personality, job embeddedness, turnover.
One of the constant challenges faced by managers is the development and retention of talent (Mitchell, Holtom, & Lee, 2001). Sagie, Birati, and Tziner (2002) reported that the total cost of employee withdrawal from organizations (including turnover, absence, lateness, and withholding of effort, as well as new hire recruiting selecting and training costs) could be as high as 17% of pretax annual income. Given the fact that personal and organizational costs of leaving a job are often very high, organizational turnover has received substantial attention in the literature (Griffeth, Hom, & Gaertner, 2000). Based on March and Simon’s (1958) turnover model, previous voluntary turnover researchers focused on why people leave, using perceived ease and desirability of leaving one’s job to predict turnover (e.g., Griffeth et al., 2000; Mobley, 1977). However, Mitchell, Holtom, Lee, Sablynski and Erez (2001) looked into the factors that keep people stay and introduced a new construct entitled “job embeddedness”.

When job embeddedness was developed, it was framed as a situational construct. Studies were conducted to discover the antecedences such as tenure, interaction with coworkers, and financial benefits associated with the current job as predictors of one’s embeddedness to organizations (Abelson, 1987; Crossley, Bennett, Jex, & Burnfield, 2007; Hom, Tsui, Wu, Lee, zhang, Fu, & Li, 2009; Maertz, Stevens, Campion, & Fernandez, 1996). Yet many factors that lead to individuals’ job embeddedness, such as tenure and family structure, are beyond the control of organizations, making it obscure for companies to choose from the HR practices to increase employee’s job embeddedness, which greatly limits the practical value of the construct. Although the construct is largely non-affect driven and individual differences are underemphasized in the main stream of study, Mitchell, et al., (2001) admitted that some of the on-the-job factors, such as organizational fit, do reflect some positive affect towards jobs. As personality leads different individuals to experience the same life events in a more positive or negative fashion (Magnus, Diener, Fujita, & Pavot, 1993), certain people might be more inclined to feel attached to an organization than others.

Our paper attempts to understand individual differences in the relationship of job embeddedness and turnover from a dispositional perspective. Despite the presence of dispositional traits, especially the five factor model of personality in most theoretical models of turnover, nearly all of the models that have been
empirically tested treat job satisfaction as an exogenous variable (Judge et al., 2001; Thoresen et al., 2003). Therefore, using the big five traits to predict job embeddedness and turnover not only offers a practical way through which the job embeddedness and turnover relationship can be utilized by practitioners during personnel selection, helping organizations to spot employees that are prone to stay, but also proposes a unique model in which disposition and turnover are meaningfully connected.

**THEORY AND HYPOTHESES**

Over the past 40 years, a number of researchers have investigated the validity of personality measures for personnel purposes (e.g., Ghiselli, 1973; Guion & Gottier, 1965; Locke & Hulin, 1962; Schmitt, Gooding, Noe, & Kirsch, 1984). Generally, researchers agree that there are five robust factors of personality, which can serve as a meaningful taxonomy for classifying personality attributes (Digman, 1989). The five traits, known as the “Big Five”, include Neuroticism, Extraversion, Conscientiousness, Openness to Experience, and Agreeableness. Substantial literature has been accumulated to provide evidence for the usefulness of the five-factor model across different theoretical frameworks (Goldberg, 1981); using different instruments (e.g., Costa & McCrae, 1988; McCrae & Costa, 1987,1991), in different cultures (e.g., Bond, Nakazato, & Shiraishi, 1975; Noller, Law, & Cmrey, 1987); using ratings obtained from different sources (E.g., Digman & Takemoto-Chock, 1981; McCrae & Costa, 1987); and with a variety of samples (Digman, 1990). Thus, the same universal personality characteristics should be relevant for employees regardless of individuals’ nationality or country of assignment.

**Job Embeddedness**

Reflecting the situation of people's being integrated in a social web, job embeddedness is a retention construct that captures a sizable portion of the decision to leave the organization (Lee et al., 2004). The construct is comprised of three elements: (a) the links people have to other people or activities, (b) the fit (match) between the person’s jobs and communities and their personal life, and (c) the extent to which people would have to make a sacrifice to break these links. These three elements are important in the organizational and community context, so job embeddedness can be work related, or non-work related. Mitchell et al. (2001) provided initial empirical support for the negative relationship between job
embeddedness and turnover. They found that aggregated job embeddedness correlated with intention to leave and predicted subsequent voluntary turnover after the effects of gender, satisfaction, commitment, job search, and perceived alternatives had been controlled. Lee et al. (2004), extending the study by looking into the different impacts of on and off-the-job embeddedness on withdrawal behaviors, further confirmed job embeddedness’ effects on reducing turnover. In more recent work, Holtom and Indderieden (2006) have integrated the unfolding model of turnover (why people leave) and job embeddedness (why people stay) to obtain a more comprehensive picture of organizational attachment. In a large national study of stayers and leavers across hundreds of employers, they found that stayers were found to have the highest levels of job embeddedness. In the current study, we mainly focus on organizational embeddedness because on-the-job embeddedness tends to be more closely related to turnover (Mitchel et al., 2001; Lee et al., 2004). In addition, factors leading to organizational embeddedness tend to be similar across different cultures, whereas the off-the-job factors can vary from country to country (Hom et al., 2009). For example, turnover does not often involve relocation in many Chinese cities, making off-the-job embeddedness less relevant to turnover.

**Big Five Mediation by Job Embeddedness**

The mediation of overall job attitudes (such as job satisfaction and commitment) between personality and turnover is well established in the current literature (Chiu, 2003; Liao, Chuang, and Joshi, 2008; Zimmerman, 2006). Liao et al. (2008) found overall job attitude mediates the relationship of personality and withdrawal behavior and turnover. Specifically, they found Extraversion and Agreeableness reduce an individual’s perceived deep-level dissimilarity to coworkers in the workgroup, which can influence the formation of sense of fit and social identity in the organization. In this study, in relating the traits to job embeddedness, we describe characteristics and empirical associations of the traits that are relevant to job embeddedness. In the following sections, we group our discussion of these associations by each of the Big Five traits.

*Neuroticism*
Neuroticism, also known inversely as Emotional Stability, refers to the tendency to experience negative affects (Zimmerman, 2006). Those who score high on Neuroticism may experience primarily one specific negative feeling, such as anxiety, anger, or depression (McCrae & Costa, 1987), which may cause them to be prone to switch jobs because of a poor perceived fit. Researchers found the negative relationship between Neuroticism and life satisfaction (e.g. DeNeve & Cooper, 1998; Connolly & Viswesvaran, 2000). Further empirical evidence supports that high levels of emotionally unstable individuals tend to have more conflict with coworkers (Organ, 1994), thereby increasing their stress levels (Spector & Jex, 1998). We suggest that neurotic people tend to be more easily to be unsatisfied with the surrounding environment and feel less embedded.

Meanwhile, McCrae and Costa (1991) suggested that people high in neuroticism lack self-confidence and self-esteem. Judge and Ilies (2002) also found that they tend to be unsure about their ability to perform the job. The tendency of negatively evaluate environment and personal ability makes neurotic employees less likely to feel embedded in the organization and more likely to leave.

Hypothesis 1a. Neuroticism is negatively related to job embeddedness.

Hypothesis 1b. Job embeddednes mediates the relationship between Neuroticism and turnover intention.

**Extraversion**

Whereas Neuroticism is related to the experience of negative life events, extraverts are predisposed to experience positive emotions (Costa & McCrae, 1992). One could expect that the factors that cause emotionally stable and extraverted individuals to be happy in life might also lead them to be happy in their jobs. DeNeve and Cooper (1998) recognized Extraversion as the key aspects of the “happy personality”, and described happy individuals as not only having specific personality traits, but also having strong relationships (Myers & Diener, 1995). Extraverts frequently display a great deal of commitment to social groups and activities (Judge, Martocchio & Thorensen, 1997). Extraversion is a main source of positive affect, which stems primarily from connections with others in terms of the quantity and quality of the relationships (DeNeve & Cooper, 1998). Evidence indicates that extraverts have more friends and spend
more time in social situations than introverts and, because of their social facility, are likely to find interpersonal interactions (such as those that occur at work) more rewarding (Watson & Clark, 1997). We thus hypothesize that extraverts have a higher tendency to be embedded in an organization because of extensive network, making them difficult to leave.

**Hypothesis 2a. Extraversion is positively related to job embeddedness.**

**Hypothesis 2b. Job embeddedness mediates the relationship between Extraversion and turnover intention.**

**Conscientiousness**

Conscientiousness is characterized by personal competence, dutifulness, self-discipline, and deliberation. There is evidence that the Conscientiousness is closely related to achievement orientation and has been labeled by some researchers, such as Digman and Takemoto-Chock (1981), as the will to achieve. Conscientious people set higher goals for themselves and tend to achieve more in work settings (Barrick & Mount, 1991). Organ and Lingl (1995) argued that this general work involvement tendency leads to a greater likelihood of obtaining satisfying work rewards, both formal (e.g., pay, promotions) and informal (e.g., recognition, respect, feelings of personal accomplishment), which enhance quality of life. As suggested by Mitchell et al. (2001), the more benefits a person is likely to give up, such as pay, respect, job stability and advancement, the greater sacrifice he or she is going to experience should they leave the current job. Therefore, it can be inferred that individuals score high on Conscientiousness will more likely have a successful career in the current job and have to give up more benefits when leaving an organization thus have greater job embeddedness.

**Hypothesis 3a. Conscientiousness is positively related to job embeddedness.**

**Hypothesis 3b. Job embeddedness mediates the relationship between Conscientiousness and turnover intention.**

**Openness to experience**

Costa and McCrae (1988) found that open individuals have a strong need for change, making them less willing to stay in the current place. According to McCrae (1987), openness to experience correlates
with creativity and divergent thinking. Barrick and Mount (1991) also found that people high on this dimension are experience seeking. Therefore, open-minded people generally have a wide range of interests and perceive a large number of alternate employment opportunities (March & Simon, 1958). Costa and McCrae (1988) also found that open individuals are better able to understand and adapt to other’s perspectives. Individuals high on openness to experience, generally regarded as intelligent and insightful, are more likely to possess cognitive complexity and intuitive perceptual accuracy to accurately perceive and interpret the situation and take actions accordingly (McCrea, 1996), making adaptation to the new environment easier for them. Therefore, with confidence and ability to build up comparable networks and achievement in the new job, open people find leaving the current working or living environment involves less psychological sacrifice, and they are more willing to explore new opportunities.

Although ample theoretical evidence suggests that open people are more likely to leave their organizations, there is some evidence to suggest the reverse would be true. Barrick and Mount (1991) found that people high on this dimension are more likely to benefit from training programs because their positive attitudes towards learning experiences in general. Because the better the required skills and knowledge employees have developed, the better the fit they will perceive for their current job. On the other hand, greater openness or intellect is related to employee adjustment. Individuals higher in this personality characteristic will have fewer rigid views of right and wrong, appropriate and inappropriate (Black, 1990), which reduces the possibility for open people to have perceived conflicts with their organizations. However, the majority of the theoretical evidence suggests that open people are more likely to leave; we thus hypothesize a negative relationship between openness to experience to job embeddedness.

Hypothesis 4a. Openness to Experience is negatively related to job embeddedness.

Hypothesis 4b. Job embeddedness mediates the relationship between Openness to Experience and turnover intention.

Agreeableness
According to evolutionary theory, individuals who are more agreeable have an easier time forming social alliances because agreeableness is often associated with traits such as courteous, good-natured, and concerned with others’ interest (Wiggins, 1996). It is understandable that it is easier for agreeable people to be accepted and liked in the surrounding environment, thus bringing them more friends and connections within an organization. In their meta-analysis, DeNeve and Cooper (1998) suggested that agreeableness fosters more and better relationships. In addition, those employees who are able to establish a social network may have a more positive experience in the organization. Being agreeable not only wins an employee more friends, kind and likable nature also helps him or her to create a favorable environment in which one can easily fit in because he or she is less likely to have conflict with colleagues. As an employee’s personal values, career goals must fit with the larger corporate culture. The tendency to be compliant makes agreeable people more likely to follow the organizational rules and regulation, and to adapt to the surrounding environment because they are more cooperative and flexible in nature, and tend to deal with conflicts collaboratively. For example, Black (1990) suggests that expatriates who are more agreeable report greater cross-cultural adjustment. We suggest that the tendency to actively adjust oneself to the environment is not limited to expatriates, and that agreeable people are more likely to be in tune with organization’s values and adjusted themselves to the working environment.

Hypothesis 5a. Agreeableness is positively related to job embeddedness.

Hypothesis 5b. Job embeddedness mediates the relationship between Agreeableness and turnover intention.

METHOD

Participants and Procedure

Data of this study were collected from online-based surveys. We sent the link of the questionnaire to people in different organizations and industries through alumni networks, such as Facebook and other major indigenous online alumni networks. Respondents were asked to voluntarily fill out the questionnaires and recommend the link to their colleagues. Respondents were from banks, accounting firms, trading companies, schools, hospitals and government organizations. A total number of 357
completed questionnaires were received. Within this sample, 55% were women; the average age was 28.5 years (s.d. = 4.94); 61% of the samples were unmarried. The average tenure with the organization was 5.5 years (s.d. = 5.1). In this sample, 4% had a high school degree, 15% had attended some college, 56% of the respondents had a bachelor’s degree, and 24% had a master’s degree or above.

Measures

Respondents were asked to fill out a questionnaire in response to questions related to their demographic information (age, gender, marital status, job position and tenure), job embeddedness, and personality. The back-translation technique outlined by Brislin (1986) was used to develop the Chinese version of the questionnaire. All the measures included in the survey are described in detail below.

**Personality.** Considering the fatigue and short attention span of some subjects, which makes brief measures desirable, we used a 30-item scale adopted from McCrae and Costa (1987). Each dimension of personality was measured by six items. Each item contained a pair of antonym about common human traits. Participants responded on a 7 point scale indicating how they see themselves at the present time, with 1 representing they agree strongly with the adjective on the left and 7 indicating agree strongly with the adjective on the right. Reliabilities for the five traits are as follows, Neuroticism .85; Openness to Experience .77; Agreeableness .83; Consciousness is .82; and Extraversion is .76.

**Job embeddedness.** A 19-item scale that measures the 3 dimensions of on-the-job embeddedness developed by Mitchell et al., (2001) was adopted in the current study. Some items will be anchored by a 7-point Likert scale, whereas others were fill-in-the-blank response options. Following Mitchell et al. (2001), we created Z-scores for the fill-in questions (such as tenure in the organization and number of coworkers interact with regularly) before including them in the calculation of the aggregate variables, and averaged items for on-embeddedness over its three sub dimensions into composite scores (α = .94).

**Turnover intentions.** Three items adopted from Cammann, Fichman, Jenkins, D., & Klesh, (1979) were used. The reliability of the scale was .78.

**Control variables.** Given sample differences in demographic attributes, we included gender, education and job title as control variables (Griffeth, Hom, & Gaertner, 2000). We excluded tenure,
marriage status, because they were components in the embeddedness index (Mitchell et al., 2001). We also excluded age, which is highly correlated with tenure (\( r = .74, p < .001 \)) and job embeddedness (Giosan et al., 2005). Controlling age and tenure and other items contained in job embeddedness would have spuriously attenuated predictive validity of job embeddedness. Because the respondents were from various industries, we also controlled company ownership (state owned, foreign owned, privately owned; Wang et al., 2003).

**RESULTS**

As shown in Table 1, three out of five dimensions of the big five personality traits are significantly related to job embeddedness and turnover intention. Neuroticism is negatively related to job embeddedness (\( r = -.24, p < .001 \)) and positively to turnover intention (\( r = .20, p < .001 \)) whereas Extraversion and Conscientiousness are positively related to job embeddedness (\( r's = .27 \) and .20, both \( p < .001 \)) and negatively to turnover intention (\( r's = -.17 \) and -.16, both \( p < .01 \)). As expected, job embeddedness is negatively related to turnover intention (\( r = -.61, p < .001 \)). These results lend primary support to hypotheses 1a, 2a, and 3a.

[Insert Table 1 here]

We used structural equation modeling (SEM) to test the hypotheses. Results for the CFA indicate that the relationship between each indicator and its respective variable was statistically significant (\( p < .001 \)), and no significant cross loadings existed, verifying the posited relationship among indicators and constructs, and thus, convergent validity. For evidence of discriminant validity, we first tested a seven-factor measurement model (five personality traits, job embeddedness and turnover intention), the indices showed that the model had adequate fit (\( \chi^2(168) = 628.6, p < .001, CFI = .92, NNFI = .90, IFI = .92, \) and RMSEA = .08). We then tested a one-factor measurement model, which fit data poorly: (\( \chi^2(189) = 3456.26, p < .001, CFI = .51, NNFI = .56, IFI = .56, \) and RMSEA = .22). A chi-squire difference test, contrasting this model to the seven-factor model was significant (\( \chi^2_{\text{diff}}(12) = 2827.66, p < .001 \)), indicating discriminably different factors. In addition, the bivariate interitem correlations in Table 1 provide some further evidence of discriminant validity.
For the mediation effects, we first tested the full mediation model, which specified the effects of five personality traits on the job embeddedness, and from job embeddedness to turnover intention, without linking “big five” directly to turnover intention. The model showed acceptable fit to the data \( \chi^2(215) = 693.74, p < .001, \) NNFI = .90, CFI = .92, IFI = .92, and RMSEA = .08). We then tested the partial mediation model with all direct paths from five personality traits to turnover intention added. The fit indices were similar as the full mediation model \( \chi^2(210) = 683.09, p < .001, \) NNFI = .90, CFI = .92, IFI = .92, and RMSEA = .08). The difference in chi-squares of 10.65 (\( \Delta df = 5 \)) between the models was not significant \( p > .05 \) using a two-tailed test, indicating that the additional direct paths between antecedents and turnover intention did not improve model fit. Therefore, the full mediation model it is adopted for further analysis.

As hypothesized, Neuroticism was positively related to turnover intention while Extraversion and Conscientiousness was negatively related to turnover intention. So hypothesize 1a, 2a and 3a were supported. But the relationship between Openness to Experience and turnover intention was not significant. Contrary to our prediction, Agreeableness was negatively related to job embeddedness. So hypotheses 4a and 5a were not supported. Consistent with previous research, job embeddedness was significantly related to turnover intention \( \beta = -.71, p < .01 \). For the mediation effects, according to the joint significance test method (MacKinnon, Lockwook, Hoffman, & Sheets, 2002), the results indicated that on-the-job embeddedness mediates the influences of Neuroticism, Extraversion and Conscientiousness on turnover intention, lending support to hypotheses 1b, 2b and 3b.

In hypothesis 4, we hypothesized that job embeddedness mediates the relationship between Openness to Experience and turnover intention. But neither the relationship between the personality traits to job embeddedness nor to turnover relationship was significant. We suggest that it could due to the reason that while open-mind people have wide range of interests and more likely see more job opportunities that make them leave the organization (Costa & McCrae, 1988), they also possess the intelligence to make themselves well fitted and connected in the current environment, keeping them stay...
Therefore, the effects of Openness to Experience on job embeddedness and turnover intention tend to be mixed and hypothesis 4a and 4b were not supported.

Contrary to our prediction, Agreeableness was negatively related to job embeddedness ($\beta = -.26, p < .01$). It could result from the fact that agreeable people tend to establish positive and satisfying relationships with different kind of people (Organ & Lingl, 1995). On one hand, these connections tend to bring them more employment information. On the other hand, establishing connections with different type of people makes agreeable people easily adapted to the new environment (March & Simon, 1958). So they may not be particularly embedded in one specific organization because of the connections and fit established, and leaving might not incur great psychological sacrifice to them.

**DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

The present study offers important implications for both researchers and practitioners of personnel selection. For researchers, the paper not only adds to the empirical evidence for the dispositional aspects of turnover, it also offers a new perspective through which job embeddedness can be studied. Although mainly consisting of contextual factors that can enmesh individuals to their jobs, job embeddedness might not be a situational construct only. Unveiling the differences in individuals’ tendency of becoming job embedded highlights job embeddedness’ potential to be a dispositional construct and opens up a direction in which the construct can be prolifically studied.

From a practitioner’s standpoint, the paper supports the links between personality and job embeddedness, which could give HR specialists stronger confidence in using personality test in personnel selection. As the cost of turnover have been estimated at 50% - 100% of an employee’s annual compensation (Hom & Griffeth, 1995), avoiding, or at least delaying employee turnover can help organizations reduce these costs. Compared with other HR practices that aims at employee retention, which usually work through increasing employees’ job satisfaction and job commitment, personality tests are easier to operate and lower in cost (Zimmerman, 2008). Because two of the FFM traits, (Conscientiousness and Emotional Stability) that were found to predict turnover have also been found to
predict performance (Barrick & Mount, 1991), and employees who score higher in extraversion and agreeableness have lower turnover intention in nature, the utility of selecting on these traits are amplified.

The study has a number of limitations. Because the current study serves as an initial exploration of the job embeddedness from an aspect that the construct was not intended to address when it was originally developed, no established theories are available to serve as the mechanism through which the hypothesized model can be explained, serving as a major concern for the study. However, due to the exploratory nature of the study, this deficiency will be overcome as more studies emerge in the area. Because all the variables are collected from a single source and the same pint of time, common method variance might be a concern. Following Podsakoff and colleagues’ (2003) recommendation, we re-estimated the mediation model with all the indicator variables loading on a general common method factor. Results indicate that the general common method did not improve model fit, and none of the individual path coefficients corresponding to the relationships between the indicators and the general method factor were significant. The coefficient estimates for hypothesized paths were similar to those obtained earlier (The results are available upon request). These findings are consistent with research on common method bias indicating that although method bias may exist, it does not always significantly affect results or conclusions (Podsakoff et al., 2003). While turnover intention does not fully predict actual turnover, Hom and Griffeth (1995) that intent to turnover is a very strong predictor of actual turnover. Future research should assess actual turnover to determine if the relationships estimated in the present study indeed hold up with turnover as an outcome of interest.

The five-factor model, although powerful in describing personalities, can still be insufficient. It is hoped that these shortcomings will spur other refined research into job embeddedness. Future research on job embeddedness could focus on other dispositional factors, such as the positive and negative affectivity mentioned in the previous sections. In the analysis, we mentioned that individuals’ sense of fit might be more pertinent to quit intention in the early stage of their career. It is also meaningful for researchers to study under what psychological process, will stayers develop a sense of job embeddedness.
REFERENCES


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Table 1 Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations

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<th></th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>s.d.</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
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<th>7</th>
<th>8</th>
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<th>10</th>
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<td>1. Neuroticism</td>
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<td>1.23</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Openness to experience</td>
<td>4.26</td>
<td>1.04</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td>3. Agreeableness</td>
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<td>-.23***</td>
<td>.14*</td>
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<td>4. Conscientiousness</td>
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<td>.19***</td>
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<td>.41***</td>
<td>.29***</td>
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<td>6. On-the-job embeddedness</td>
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<td>-.24***</td>
<td>0.08</td>
<td>0.02</td>
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<td>.19***</td>
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<td>1.44</td>
<td>.20***</td>
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<td>-.16***</td>
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*** p < .001
** p < .01
Figure 1 Structural Model with Standardized Path Estimates

Note: This is a simplified version of the actual model. It does not show control variables, indicators, error terms, or exogenous factor variances.

* $p < .05$

** $p < .01$