Job Embeddedness

From Theory to Practice

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Abstract

Voluntary employee turnover is one of the most concerned areas both for academicians and practioners as far as human resource management (HRM) is concerned. Job embeddedness (JE) is an emerging concept in the field of employee turnover research which suggests some novel & stimulating ways to think about employee retention globally. JE adds uniquely to the prediction of employee turnover and holds a meaningful role in understanding voluntary employee turnover. However, despite the encouraging implications of the same, not much has been conversed about the practical efficacy of it. Thus the present paper while highlighting the contributions being made by JE to the extant turnover literature put the very concept on the tables of HR practitioners in order to encourage them to study implications of the same in their organizations and further develop strategies to foster it.

Keywords: *Job Embeddedness, Employee Turnover, Employee Retention, Human Resource Management.*

INTRODUCTION

Employee retention remains an organizational challenge since more than five decades and has led to tremendous research

as to how valued employees can be kept from leaving the organization (Lee et al., 2004). However globalization and intermingling economies, have shifted the paradigm of human resource management. Traditional strategies of employee retention are no longer suitable to the changing expectations of the global talent pool (Cappelli, 2000). Continuous development and application of new and innovative human resource practices have become imperative for the organizations to remain competitive (Agarwala, 2003). Veteran managers today realize that hiring and retaining an employee is no longer the same (due to cutting throat competition, employee awareness and expectations from their employers, etc.) as it used to be and that employee retention has become a complex process. Hence in order to maintain a stable and sustainable workforce, organizations need to continuously explore, adapt and formulate strategies which (1) must be aligned with the overall organizational objectives; (2) are better suited to the skilled employee of today; and (3) are based on more recent turnover theories (E.g. Job Embeddedness).

Mitchell and his colleagues in 2001 proposed the construct of 'Job Embeddedness' (JE) and made a valuable addition to the pool of turnover theories. JE shifts the focus of turnover research from '*why employees leave*' to '*why employees stay*' in an organization. It measures the extent to which employees feel stuck, connected, attached or embedded in their jobs. According to Mitchell and his colleagues, 2001b (pp. 1104) '*Job embeddedness represents a broad constellation of influences on employee retention. The critical aspects of job embeddedness are (1) the extent to which people have links to other people or activities, (2) the extent to which their jobs and communities are similar to or fit with the other*

aspects in their life spaces, and, (3) the ease with which links can be broken-what they would give up if they left, especially if they had to physically move to other cities or homes.'

The authors have labeled the above discussed aspects as links, fit and sacrifice, respectively and have emphasized their importance both on-the-job and off-the-job. Thus job embeddedness is a three-by-two matrix suggesting six dimensions: links, fit, and sacrifice associated with an individual's organization and with his or her community. Since the very inception, the construct has gained attention of researchers not only in the US but outside it too, probably due to its predictive power in the turnover research, as discussed further. Mitchell et al. (2001b) tested the embeddedness construct among employees in the grocery and hospital industries in the U.S. and the analysis supported that JE scale is a significant predictor of turnover, beyond traditional variables of job satisfaction, organizational commitment, perceived alternatives and job search. Since then, the construct is being studied by researchers across the world, who attempt to establish its predictive validity across national and cultural boundaries (E.g. Robinson et al., 2014; Ramesh and Gelfand, 2010; Tanova and Holtom, 2008). Furthermore, in an attempt to expand the utility of the construct, researchers have been studying the relationship of JE with other important organizational outcomes (E.g. Ng & Feldman, 2007; Harris, Wheeler & Kacmar, 2011; Ferreira & Coetzee, 2013; Ringl, 2013; etc.). Despite the encouraging implications of the measure in the field of employee turnover, not much has been conversed about the practical efficacy of the same. In a time, when keeping valued employees from leaving the organization has become requisite, it

makes sense to have a clearer understanding of the concept that holds good promise as far as employee retention is concerned. Thus, the paper endeavors to discuss the following aspects explicitly – the concept of job embeddedness, dimensions and measurement of job embeddedness, predictive validity and promising expansions of the same across nations and organizations. At the end we input the suggestions as to how organizations can implement a sound retention management program incorporating job embeddedness.

EVOLUTION OF JOB EMBEDDEDNESS

Evolution of job embeddedness lies in the history of turnover research. Long back, the most comfortable answer to the question of 'why people leave' may have been, because they aren't satisfied with their jobs and have some other place to go. Likewise, answer to 'why people stay' may plainly have been the opposite of the reason for leaving, that is, since they like their jobs and don't have any other place to go (Lee, Burch & Mitchell, 2014).

Established research on turnover goes back to 1958 when March and Simon put forward the first model of voluntary turnover and posited perceived ease of movement (presence of job alternatives) and desirability to leave one's job (level of job satisfaction) to predict employee's intentions to leave. Although, many a researchers followed thereafter and presented varied attitude driven models with job satisfaction and organizational commitment as most operationalized variables (e.g., Mobley, 1977; Steers & Mowday, 1981), the ability to predict voluntary turnover remained remarkably weak. Breaking away from the traditional theory of employee turnover, Lee et al. in 1996 came up with the unfolding

model of voluntary turnover which emphasized that employee leaving an organization may not necessarily be dissatisfied with the employer and identified four different paths to turnover: (1) Leaving an unsatisfying job, which is same as the traditional turnover process discussed above. (2) Leaving for something better; it entails leaving for an attractive alternative and, may not necessarily involve dissatisfaction. (3) Following a plan; it refers to leaving a job in response to a script or plan already in place for e.g. employees who intend to quit if they or their spouse becomes pregnant, or if they get accepted into a particular degree program etc. (4) Leaving without a plan; which is all about impulsive action, typically in response to negative shocks such as being passed over for a promotion or having a family member suffer a catastrophic illness requiring extensive care.

Although varied theories prevailed, the focus of the researchers was majorly to understand as to '*why employees leave*', until Mitchell and his colleagues in 2001 came up with a new construct of Job Embeddedness and shifted the focus from '*why employees leave*' to '*why employees stay*' in an organization. They emphasized that understanding what makes employees stay may help organizations develop better retention strategies and help them bind their valuable assets to it.

CONCEPT AND DIMENSIONS OF JOB EMBEDDEDNESS

According to Harman et al., 2007 (p. 53), *"Job embeddedness describes a web of forces that cause people to feel they cannot leave their job. The critical components to job embeddedness include the extent to which people are linked with others or to activities, the extent to which their jobs and communities fit with other aspects of their lives,*

and the ease with which their respective links can be broken, that is, what they would sacrifice if they left? These three dimensions are identified as links, fit, and sacrifice, respectively, and are concerned with both on-job and off-the-job experiences. Links refers to formal and informal connections that a person has with other individuals and institutions. The more connected an individual is with the organization (e.g., belongs to work groups) and with the community (e.g., affiliated with local clubs, interest groups, or churches), the more embedded he or she is. Fit is the individual's perceived compatibility with the organization and with the community. The employee's personal values and career goals need to be congruent with the larger organizational culture; this congruence allows the employee to feel tied personally and professionally to the organization. In addition, individuals need to feel as though they and their family also fit with the community in which they live. Again, the better the fit, the more likely the person is to stay. Sacrifice refers to the perceived cost of leaving. These costs may be material or psychological. Leaving may entail giving up the advantages associated with tenure (e.g., big office, vacation time), as well as the personal losses such as companionship with colleagues or perks unique to the organization. Community sacrifices are relevant only if the individual needs to move to a new location. The loss of the sense of belonging to a community (including giving up such things as tickets to the local football team, the home inhabited for 20 years) can influence the community sacrifice dimension.' As proposed originally, the construct of job embeddedness is an aggregate formed of six dimensions (Mitchell, 2001b). The construct is causal in nature which means in a path diagram, causal arrows would go from individual items to the six dimensions and from dimensions to the overall construct (Law et al., 1998). In a more layman language, the construct doesn't mean that being embedded leads to better links, or better pay or better community fit rather they all lead a person to become more embedded. In addition, it is important to note that job embeddedness is a multi-dimensional aggregate of the two sub (i.e. on the job and off the job embeddedness) dimensions that might be instrumental in keeping someone at a job and not a unified construct.
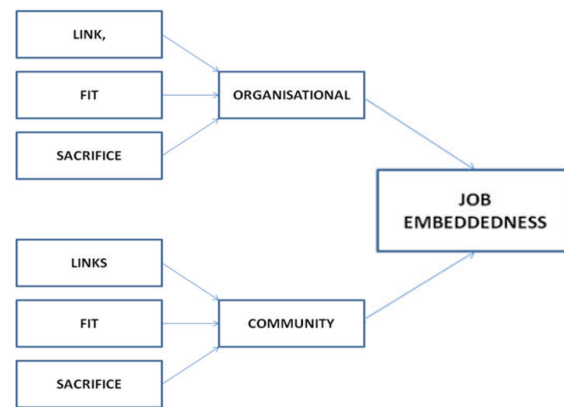
MEASUREMENT OF JOB EMBEDDEDNESS

Job Embeddedness is comparatively a recent concept as far as research in turnover is concerned. Despite having encouraging implications, the construct needs further development and unanimity (Lee, Burch & Mitchell, 2014). Much of the research has focused on determining the relationship of Job Embeddedness with various organizational outcomes (e.g. Ringl, 2013), whereas attempt to discuss the conceptual and measurement issues has remained scanty (e.g. Lee, Burch & Mitchell, 2014). Zhang et al. 2012, in their review, stress on the need of better conceptual and measurement clarity of job embeddedness before attempting to analyze its relationship with other organizational outcomes.

Till date, measurement of job embeddedness

is done majorly through the means of questionnaire which involves either of the two – composite measure or global measure.

1. *Composite measure:* The original (composite) scale as developed by Mitchel et al. (2001b) comprises of 40 items, each of which describes one of the six dimensions of overall job embeddednees (Fit, Links and Sacrifice both On-the-job and Off-the-job). The questionnaire developed was used to assess the embeddedness level of employees of a regional grocery store and a community based hospital, chronbach alpha for which came out to be 0.85 and 0.87 respectively. Thereafter, attempts to develop the scale further mostly involve putting in or removing items from the unique Mitchel and colleagues' 40 item scale. E.g. Lee et al. (2004), revised the scale to contain 34 items; Holtom, Mitchell, Lee & Tid (2006) simplified the original measure further and retained only 21 items; whereas, Ramesh & Gelfand (2010), modified the original scale not just by deleting certain items, but also adding and introducing a new dimension of family embeddedness. The alpha reliability of this new dimension came out to be above 0.75.

Although having advantage of theoretical richness because of inclusion of non-attitudinal and off-the-job components, Crossley et al. (2007) indicted the composite measure of having both theoretical as well as statistical limitations.

2. *Global measure:* Crossley et al. (2007) attempted to expand the theory and developed a new 7-item 'global' measure of JE that evaluates general attachment with the organization. It comprises of items as, 'I feel attached to this organization.' 'It would be difficult for me to leave this organization', and 'I am tightly connected to this organization'. The global measure doesn't differentiate between 'on' and 'off' the job factors. Also it does not differentiate between the three dimensions of links, fit, and sacrifice.

Comparison between 'Composite' & 'Global' Measure

Crossley et al. (2007) emphasize both theoretical and statistical advantage of their global measure over the original composite measure. They emphasize that the global measure permits the respondents to include details from their individual judgment rather than particular aspects whereas; the composite measure may not include parts which may be relevant to the respondent or include the ones which may be irrelevant. Further, whereas global measure captures the unique weightings which an individual places on different aspects when forming the summary perception, the final score of overall job embeddedness in the composite measure is an average of both job-related as well as community factors, which do not capture their unique weightings. On the other hand, composite measure boasts of having an advantage of theoretical richness and contribution as it overtly includes off-the-job and non attitudinal components, as compared to global measure, which assesses rather general reactions, that may mix attitudinal and emotional components (Lee, Burch & Mitchell, 2014).

In addition to theoretical differences, composite and global measures differentiate statistically too. Whereas former is a formative model, the latter is a better, reflective measurement model wherein the direction of causality flows from the latent

construct to the items. Reflective model has statistical superiority over the formative one as a number of statistical methods can be employed to analyze its properties like reliability analysis, EFA and SEM; unlike the formative model whose property analysis methods are comparatively less developed (Lee, Burch and Mitchell, 2014).

Summing up the above differences, it becomes difficult to conclude which of the two scales is better. While the composite scale has theoretical richness, it has statistical limitations over the global measure. Likewise, global measure doesn't differentiate between the work and non-work factors of job embeddedness. Thus, if a researcher aims to study the relationship between job embeddedness and its components with other organizational variables; composite measure is the one to be chosen. On the contrary if the model under observation includes latent constructs, better choice would be reflective construct.

PREDICTIVE VALIDITY OF JOB EMBEDDEDNESS AND PROMISING EXPANSIONS OF THE SAME ACROSS NATIONS AND ORGANIZATIONS

Predictive Validity of Job Embeddedness

The very first empirical result of job embeddedness was reported by Mitchell et al. (2001b). Taking two different samples one from grocery store (177) and another from hospital employees (208), the authors reported predictive validities of .24 and .25 respectively (p < .01 for both), with voluntary employee turnover. Further, with job satisfaction, commitment, job alternatives, job search behaviour and gender held constant,

embeddedness explained incremental variance in turnover in both the samples. Though much of the previous research uses overall job embeddedness (e.g., Holtom & O'Neill 2004), successive researches separate it into its two major dimensions of organizational (i.e. on-the-job) and community (i.e., off-the-job) embeddedness (e.g., Lee et al., 2004 & Kraimer et al., 2012). Jiang et al. in 2012, conducted a meta analysis covering 65 independent samples (n = 42,907) and found that the corrected weighted average correlation of turnover with organizational embeddedness was _.19 (with a 95% confidence interval of _.27 to _.11) and that with community embeddedness was _.12 (with a 95% confidence internal of _.18 to _.06). Based on a meta-analytic regression, the authors reported that organizational and community embeddedness, job satisfaction, affective commitment, and job alternatives all added uniquely to the prediction of employee turnover. Thus, the evidence clearly shows that all of these variables, including both organizational and community embeddedness hold a meaningful role in understanding voluntary employee turnover. In other words, job embeddedness is a predictively valid construct.

Promising Expansions of Job Embeddedness Across Nations and Organizations

Tanova & Holtom, in 2008 investigated relationship of embeddedness with voluntary employee turnover in 4 European countries namely, Denmark, Finland, Italy, and Spain. After controlling for gender, age, income, higher education, job satisfaction, job search, and absenteeism, across the entire sample (n = 8,952), the authors found that both organizational and community

embeddedness validly predicted subsequent voluntary turnover. In Denmark (n = 1,571) and in Italy (n = 2,667), only organizational embeddedness predicted turnover, whereas in Finland (n = 1,797) and in Spain (n = 2849), both organizational and community embeddedness predicted turnover. This was the first systematic study which was conducted outside the US. Further, in 2010, Ramesh & Gelfand expanded the scope of job embeddedness theory and investigated whether the predictive validity of job embeddedness might generalize from an individualistic to a collectivist culture, namely, India, and whether the sub dimensions of embeddedness might be differentially predictive across cultures. They also introduced the construct of family embeddedness. Drawing samples from three call centers in the United States (n = 323) and three call centers in India (n = 474) and using numerous controls (like, organizational commitment, job satisfaction, job search, job alternatives, external prestige, country, years in area, gender, and age), the authors reported the predictive validity of job embeddedness in both the Indian and US contexts. Further, they found that the fit dimension of job embeddedness was a better predictor in the United States than in India, whereas the links dimension was a better predictor in India than in the United States. Finally, they showed that family embeddedness predicted turnover in both cultures over and above job embeddedness and controls.

When taken together, the above discussed papers expand our confidence in the predictive validity of job embeddedness across nations and cultures.

The unique predictive power of job embeddedness doesn't hold true just across nations and cultures but organizations too. In 2004, Leet et al. conducted their study in a big multi nationally operated bank and established that besides predicting who leaves job, job emeddedness also predicts in-role and extra-role performance. Additionally, Mallol, Holtom, & Lee (2007) conducted their study in banking firms and found that though levels of job embeddedness varied systematically between US born and non-US born employees (pre-dominantly Hispanic), the overall construct predicted voluntary turnover for both groups. Moving ahead, Ramesh & Gelfand (2010) establish the predictive validity of JE across the call centre industry both in US and India. Though much of the Job Embeddedness research has been conducted in private sector organizations, Jiang et al. 2012, in their meta analyses show that job embeddedness explains more variance in turnover intentions ($\_R2 \_ .05$, $p \_ .01$) and actual turnover ($\_R2 \_ .03$, $p \_ .01$) in public sector organizations. Thus, JE is predictively valid not only across national boundaries but organizations too.

INTEGRATING JOB EMBEDDEDNESS WITH ORGANIZATION'S EMPLOYEE RETENTION PROGRAM

Section discussed above establishes one's belief that although relatively novel, the concept of JE holds promising prospect in the study of employee retention.

Understanding Employee Turnover

But, before putting the topic of employee retention under lens, it is important to first understand some important distinctions of employee turnover. Employees leaving an organization may be due to many reasons but not all the turnovers have similar implications on the organization. Voluntary turnover is

one which is initiated by an employee and may incur losses to an organization. But not all voluntary turnovers affect an organization equally. Functional turnover is the exit of employees whose talent is easily replaceable or employees who are poor performers, and hence may not hurt an organization much. Whereas dysfunctional turnover is departure of employees who are either high performers or those with hard-to-replace skills; departure of women or minority group members that erode the diversity of company's workforce; or turnover rates which may lead to huge replacement costs, and hence draws the attention of organization towards itself (Allen, 2008). Moving ahead, is it possible for an organization to control all the dysfunctional turnovers? The answer is no. Howsoever heavily an organization invests; some of the individuals would still leave. Thus it narrows down the focus of organization's retention plan towards those employees whose hurting departure might be controlled or avoided by organization.

Why employee turnover is such a critical issue and why so much stress is laid on studying and understanding the underlying causes of the same? It is majorly for the following reasons. Firstly – (1) turnover is expensive, (2) turnover affects organization's performance, and (3) it may gradually turn out to be too complicated to handle. Secondly, veteran managers believe that by understanding the reasons behind why employees leave and the process of it, they may be able to manage it more effectively.

Retention Management Based on Traditional Turnover Theories

As discussed before in the paper, theory that prevailed traditionally was that certain specific turnover drivers (E.g. Job Characteristics, leadership, work environment, individual characteristics, etc.) affect the key attitudes of job satisfaction and organizational commitment which trigger the withdrawal process. Intentions to leave, job search behavior and availability of better alternatives may result in actual turnover if failed to be managed efficiently. Thus organizations strive to proactively manage retention by either monitoring & adjusting major facets pertaining to the work environment, which may affect an employee's wish to continue or leave; or keeping tabs on available opportunities in order to ensure that the positions remain competitive.

Furthermore, the unfolding model of turnover identifies four different paths to turnover: (1) leaving an unsatisfying job, (2) leaving for something better, (3) following a plan, and (4) leaving without a plan. (Lee & Mitchell, 1994)

In case of the first two paths, organizational turnover management techniques are similar to somewhat those discussed above. Leaving a job due to plan already in place means leaving a job in case of certain expected circumstances, e.g. pregnancy, higher education, relocation due to family responsibilities, etc. In this case organizations don't have much to do as far as retaining the employee is concerned. Leaving without a plan pertains to leaving a job due to *'Shock'* [Shocks lead the person to consider leaving his or her job. The shock can be internal or external to the individual, and it can be negative (e.g. a fight with the boss), positive (e.g. winning the lottery), or neutral (e.g. an unanticipated job offer). Additionally, the social and cognitive context in which the shock occurs provides the decision frame or frame of reference within which the employee interprets the meaning of the shock; Cho & Son, 2012; p. 52]. Now, organizations have

the capacity to manage employee turnover due to negative shocks by either minimizing the shocks or aiding employees in coming out of the shock by providing necessary support

Embedding Job Embeddedness in Organization's Retention Management Plan

Job Embeddedness shifted the focus of researchers from 'why employees leave' to 'why employees stay'. Job embeddedness is the extent of an employee's 'stuckness', or enmeshing, within a larger social system, and it results from numerous external (or contextual) forces—which are labeled links, fit, and sacrifice—in the organization and community that operate on a focal employee (Lee, Burch & Mitchell, 2014). Research has shown that the measure of job embeddedness improves the prediction of voluntary turnover over and above that accounted for by job satisfaction, organizational commitment, perceived alternatives, and job search (Mitchell et al., 2001b), and thus, lays emphasis on the inclusion of the same in the organization's retention management plan.

Taking cues from the Mitchell, Holtom & Lee (2001a) paper, the current section attempts to give suggestions as to how HR practitioners can embed their employees in order to retain organization's valued assets.

Embedding Employees by Building and Strengthening Links

Organizational links can be strengthened by proving mentors, designing work in teams and further fostering cohesiveness among those teams, or providing employee referrals. Whereas, encouraging and supporting community links; for example, through community service organizations can fortify

community embeddedness. Research suggests higher the number of links between the person and the organization or community, the more she or he is bound to them (Mitchell et al., 2001b).

Embedding Employees by Building and Strengthening Organizational and Community Fit

According to Mitchell and his colleagues (2001b) pp. 1104; an employee's personal values, career goals, and plans for the future must fit with the larger corporate culture and the demands of his or her immediate job (job knowledge, skills, and abilities). In addition, a person will consider how well he or she fits the community and surrounding environment. By providing realistic information about the company and the job during recruitment, incorporating job and organizational fit into employee selection and providing clear socialization and communication about the enterprise's values and culture; organizations can enhance employees' organizational fit. Further community fit can be encouraged by recruiting locally when feasible, providing detailed information regarding the community at the time of selection process, and trying to build ties between company and the community (e.g. by sponsoring local events). Organizations must strive to promote employees fit with the organization and community as the better the fit, the higher the likelihood that an employee will feel professionally and personally tied to an organization.

Embedding employees by building and strengthening organizational and community sacrifice

Given below are few strategies through

which organizations can endeavor to embed employees by fortifying sacrifice. Tying financial incentives to tenure. Providing unique incentives that might be hard to find elsewhere (such as sabbaticals) may foster organizational sacrifice. Furthermore encouraging home ownership (for instance, by providing home-buying assistance) and developing career paths that do not require relocation, may foster community sacrifice.

Thus, given above are a few strategies by which organizations can attempt to integrate job embeddedness in their retention management program.

CONCLUSION

As the present research states, JE is an important concept that warrants attention of HR professionals globally. Contributions being made by Job Embeddedness, to the extant turnover literature, have encouraged organizations to implement practices that would promote job embeddedness and on the same side aid organizations in retaining their most valuable assets. Managing retention can be quite challenging. It requires good understanding of the entire process, i.e. analysing the ongoing strategies and approaches, putting them into practice and ultimately learning from the outcomes. But the intense need of handling the issue of employee turnover makes '*it well worth the effort*' (Allen, 2016).

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