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ORGANIZATIONAL COMMITMENT AND MANAGERIAL  
TURNOVER: A LONGITUDINAL STUDY

Lyman W. Porter, et al

California University

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LYMAN W. PORTER

WILLIAM J. CRAMPON

*University of California, Irvine*

FRANK J. SMITH

*Sears, Roebuck and Co.*

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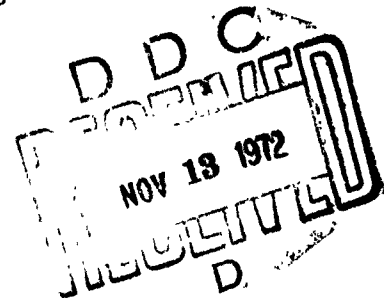
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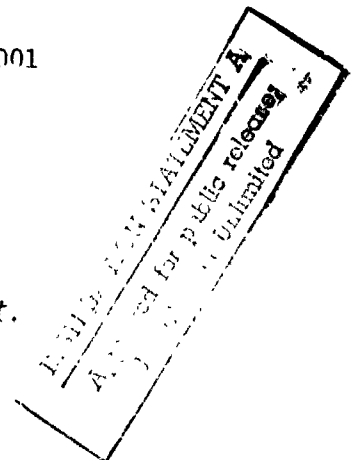
*University of California  
Irvine, California 92664*



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Organizational Commitment and Managerial Turnover:

A Longitudinal Study

Lyman W. Porter

William J. Crampon

University of California, Irvine

Frank J. Smith

Sears, Roebuck and Co.

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Over the years there have been a relatively large number of studies pertaining to employee turnover. However, as recently as 1970, a review of the literature in industrial psychology (Hinrichs, 1970) deplored the fact that there is "a surprising lack of comprehensive research on turnover in view of the obvious costs to industry." Clearly, the problem is not one of amount of research so much as it is of the type of research in terms of whether or not it helps increase our understanding of the phenomenon.

Much of the research on turnover has involved the collection of attitude data from terminating employees either at the point of departure or shortly thereafter through the use of exit interviews or exit questionnaires. The problems involved in obtaining valid attitude data under such circumstances are obvious and have been demonstrated in a number of studies (e.g., Lefkowitz & Katz, 1969). Many of the problems associated with the exit interview or questionnaire can be avoided, of course, by the collection of attitude data at a point in time while a sample of individuals are currently employed with an organization and then waiting for a period of

time to determine which ones subsequently terminate. This permits the comparison of prior attitude scores between staying and leaving groups. Despite the relative superiority of this type of design, it has been used infrequently compared to "post hoc" designs. It is, though, coming into more common use, as demonstrated by the recent studies of Hulin (1966), Katzell (1968), Kraut (1970), Mikes & Hulin (1968), Taylor & Weiss (1969), and Waters & Roach (1971). In general, the results of these studies demonstrated relationships in the predicted direction--namely, that those who had more negative attitudes at the time of measurement were more likely subsequently to leave the organization--though the strength of such relationships varied a good deal across the different investigations.

Most of these studies (Kraut, 1970, being a specific exception), and indeed most attitude-turnover studies of any type of design, concentrated on measuring satisfactions with various aspects of the immediate work situation. Such a focus, though, might be considered an indirect approach to investigating attitudes predictive of turnover. A more direct approach would appear to be one where the attitudes measured pertain to the individual's intentions concerning staying or leaving and his degree of commitment to the employing organization. Such studies (e.g., Kraut, 1970, and Atchison & Lefferts, 1972) are, nevertheless, rarely found in the literature.

A more important limitation of even the better designed prediction-type studies relating attitudes to turnover, however, is the fact that the attitudes are usually measured at only one time prior to the eventual termination of a certain percentage of a given sample of employees. It thus has not been possible to trace the change in attitudes prior to the point of departure for those who leave (and across the equivalent periods of time for those still remaining with the organization). Consequently, we know little

about whether attitudes of eventual leavers are lower than those of stayers quite early in the employment period and whether there is an even further decline prior to leaving. Therefore, our ability to interpret the findings and gain greater comprehension of conditions leading to turnover is reduced.

The present study is designed to measure changes in employee attitudes at frequent intervals across time and to determine the differences in such attitude development between those who leave after a certain period of time and those who remain. Certain additional features are incorporated into the design, however: (1) the sample is one of employees in training for management positions, whereas most of the earlier studies have concentrated on non-management samples; (2) the period of time covered involves the initial employment period, from the first day on the job up through the end of 15 months of employment; previous literature would indicate that this is an especially critical period for most organizations with respect to turnover, since the bulk of turnover occurs during the early months a person is with an organization (Herzberg, et al., 1957); (3) the attitudes measured concern the degree of the person's commitment to the organization, and the employee's assessment of the strength of various possible sources of his attachment to the organization.

Method

Subjects

The subjects for this study were 212 management trainees employed by a major retail organization. All but one of the subjects were recent college graduates who had entered the management training program as their first full-time job after graduating from college. All of the members of the sample were in their mid-twenties, held a bachelor's degree, had graduated from college between January and August, and had entered the

training program between February and August of the same year. The majority of the trainees entered the training program during the month of June.

Upon entering the organization each of the management trainees was assigned to one of twelve training centers for nine to twelve months. These training centers were regular retail stores of the organization which had the responsibility of training 15 to 30 management trainees during the year. Each training center had a training director who was responsible for supervising the trainees and insuring that they were exposed to all phases of the retail operation. After completing the training program the trainees were transferred to a regular store assignment where they assumed management responsibilities.

Out of the original 212 management trainees, 56 or 26.5% were required to leave the organization during their first 15 months of employment to go on military leave of absence. This portion of the original pool of subjects was, therefore, dropped from the study. Out of the remaining 156 management trainees, 37 or 23.7% voluntarily left the organization during their first 15 months of employment. This group of 37 individuals forms the base turnover sample ("leavers"), while the remaining 119 trainees who stayed with the organization for at least 15 months forms the base non-turnover ("stayers") sample.

#### Procedure

Data collection. The study was designed to collect attitude data during the nine to twelve months of the training program and subsequent attitudinal data during the respondents' first three to six months on a regular (non-training) job. Data collection began on a certain date. For those individuals who started to work after this date, the first questionnaire administration was conducted on their first day in the organization. Since individuals started to work on different dates, this meant that all questionnaire



administration schedules were "individualized" based on the person's starting date. A minority of the members of the sample, however, had already started to work for the company prior to the date that data collection began. Consequently, the initial questionnaire administration for these individuals was tabulated in the results according to how many months they had already been working for the organization. (Thus, for example, if an individual had been working for the company for two months before the investigation began, the first set of questionnaires he filled out was counted as his "two month" questionnaires, and so forth; for him there would be no first day, or first month questionnaires).

Table 1 shows the sample return for each of the eight questionnaire administrations along with the total sample return out of all possible. During the entire study, 814 questionnaires were returned out of a possible

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Insert Table 1 about Here

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1,081, representing an overall return rate of 75.6%. This return rate is believed to be relatively good due to the difficulty of obtaining continuing cooperation with a large number of geographically dispersed people over a 15-month period of time. The low returns in the last two administrations (12 and 15 months) were in part due to the respondents being transferred out of the training centers into regular assignments (and thus becoming even more dispersed geographically) and the consequent difficulty of locating them in time to fill out the particular questionnaire administrations. If the last two administrations are excluded, and only the returns during the first nine months of the training program are considered, 689 questionnaire packets out of a possible 828 were returned for an overall response rate of 83.2% for the training period.

The method used to collect the questionnaire data was for the training directors of each of the twelve training centers to hand out the questionnaires to the respondents according to a predetermined schedule based on the starting date of each of the respondents. The respondents mailed the completed questionnaires directly to the University in self-addressed and stamped envelopes. At the beginning of the study, and at each of the subsequent questionnaire administrations, the confidential nature of the study was stressed. In addition, to insure confidentiality, the respondents were only identified in terms of code numbers assigned to them at the beginning of the study.

Attitudes measured. The two attitude instruments used in this study pertained to the commitment that the management trainees had toward the employing organization. The first of these instruments was a fifteen-item questionnaire designed to measure the overall strength of the respondents' organizational commitment. This instrument focused on various components of commitment; i.e., willingness to put forth extra effort to help the organization succeed, loyalty to the organization, concern about the fate of the organization, willingness to recommend the organization as a place to work, etc. Each of the fifteen items was phrased in terms of a statement to which the respondent was asked to rate his agreement on a scale ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree." The overall commitment score for each individual was computed by averaging across the fifteen items on the questionnaire. (The median split half correlation across the eight administrations of the instrument was .72, and the median test-retest correlation between adjacent administrations was .66. Barth, 1972, has reported an internal reliability coefficient of .89).

The second instrument was designed to measure the perceived influence of various situational or organizational variables on the individual's desire to remain with or leave the organization, i.e., his attachment to the organization. It contained 12 items, each one relating to some potentially important feature of the work situation. Since the purpose of the instrument was to look at each of the variables separately, rather than measure their combined influence, the scores on the 12 items were not summed. The items were in a seven-point format with the subjects responding on a scale from "strong influence toward leaving" to "strong influence toward staying." A list of the 12 items will be found in Table 3. The median test-retest correlation between adjacent administrations of the individual items ranged from .39 for attitudes about the effectiveness of the organization to .66 for attitudes about the values of the organization. The median overall test-retest correlation of all the individual items was .44. These relatively low test-retest correlations are not surprising since they represent single item reliabilities and especially since the data were collected during the very early employment period when attitudes can be expected to fluctuate from one time period to the next adjacent period.

Pairing of stayers and leavers. In order to develop a comparative data base for the analysis of the individuals who terminated, it was necessary to construct a sample that paired a stayer with each of the 37 leavers. This pairing was accomplished by using the following criteria:

1. Each member of the pair was in the same training center.
2. Each member of the pair filled out a questionnaire on his first day on the job and responded to identical subsequent questionnaire administrations.

3. If the leaver was in the training program for more than nine months but less than twelve months, his paired stayer was in the training program for the same length of time.
4. If the leaver left the organization after completing the training program and being assigned to a regular (non-training) job, his paired stayer received the same type of job assignment.

By using these four stringent criteria it was possible to pair 25 of the leavers with stayers. This group of 50 management trainees makes up the comparative subsamples that will be used in the majority of the analyses of the results to be presented in this article. Across all the attitudes measured in this study, there were no significant differences between the attitudes on the first day on the job between the 25 paired stayers and the other 92 individuals (i.e., non-paired stayers) who remained with the organization. Likewise, there were no significant differences in attitudes on the first day on the job between the 25 paired leavers and the other seven individuals (non-paired leavers) who terminated their employment. As a result, it can be assumed that the subsamples making up the paired samples were reasonably representative of the two base samples from which they were drawn.

## Results

### Strength of Organizational Commitment

Longitudinal analysis. The primary method for analyzing the findings from the questionnaire designed to measure the strength of organizational commitment involved comparing the changes in attitudes of the paired individuals (see Method section) between the time they entered the organization and the time the leaver member of the pair terminated. In order to make this analysis, it was necessary to utilize only those leavers who

had filled out a questionnaire relatively close to their actual date of termination. This period was arbitrarily set at the final two months prior to a leaver's departure. The sample of leavers was thus reduced from 25 to 16, due to the fact that some either failed to fill out a requested questionnaire within their last two months or else left at such a time that the administration schedule did not call for a questionnaire to be completed during this period. Thus, the Ns for this analysis consist of 16 leavers and 16 paired stayers.

The results of the longitudinal analysis comparing changes across time from the first day on the job to the final two months for leavers as contrasted with the paired stayers are presented in Table 2. As this table shows, the eventual leavers -- as a group -- began work in the

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Insert Table 2 about here

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first week with significantly lower ( $p < .05$ , 1-tail test) expressed commitment than did the stayers, the means being 5.37 and 5.90, respectively. This difference is also reflected in the relatively high point biserial correlation of .41 between eventual turnover and the first day organizational commitment scores. During their period of employment with the organization, the leavers exhibited a mean decrease in commitment from 5.37 to 4.94, while the paired stayers attitudes for the same period remained relatively constant, 5.90 to 5.87. The decrease across time for the leavers approaches statistical significance but does not reach it because of the relatively high variance in the

leavers' scores for the final two month period. In other words, some leavers' commitment declined distinctly from start to finish, while other leavers' feelings about the organization remained fairly constant or even increased somewhat. In any event, the leavers were still significantly below the paired stayers during the last two months of their employment just as they had been below at the beginning. The point biserial for the last two-months period was similar to that for the first day, .43 as compared to .41.

Cross-sectional analysis. A somewhat different way to compare the strength of commitment of the paired stayers and leavers is one that utilizes a "last back" technique. This technique, however, cannot follow the same individuals through time, as will be explained below; it represents, therefore, a cross-sectional rather than a longitudinal form of analysis. In this method of analysis, commitment scores are calculated for all leavers who are "x" number of months away from terminating. These scores are then compared with the scores of the paired stayers at the equivalent administration period. To illustrate: Some leavers terminated after only a few weeks, some after three or four months and some after 10 or 12 months. If for each leaver we can obtain his score during his final 1 1/2 months with the organization -- which for some individuals would be their first month of employment and for others their 12 or 13th -- we can match his last questionnaire with that of a stayer who is completing the same administration. (For example, a leaver completing a nine month questionnaire who then leaves the following month is paired with a stayer who also completed a nine month

questionnaire). Thus we would have matched groups for that period of time prior to termination. We could also do this for other periods of time prior to termination of the leavers, such as 2 - 3 1/2 months prior, and 4 - 5 1/2 months prior. Obviously, those individuals who left after only a month or so of employment cannot be a part of the "2 - 3 1/2 months prior to leaving" group nor the "4 - 5 1/2 months" group. Likewise, someone who left after three months could not be part of the 4 - 5 1/2 month group but would be represented in each of the other two groups. It is for this reason that the same individual leavers cannot be followed across all "months before leaving" groups and hence this is why this must be a cross-sectional rather than a longitudinal analysis.

The findings from comparing stayers and leavers at each of three time periods prior to a set of leavers terminating are shown in Figure 1.

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 Insert Figure 1 about here  
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The right hand columns show essentially the same results as Table 2 because they contain essentially the same data (except for the fact that in Figure 1 the time before leaving is within the final 1 1/2 rather than 2 months). That is, leavers who are a month and a half or less away from actually terminating report significantly less commitment than stayers (4.89 vs. 6.08,  $p < .01$ ). When leavers are 2 to 3 1/2 months from actually terminating they demonstrate less commitment than equivalent stayers, but the difference is not as great (and is not significant). And, if eventual leavers are at least six months

away from terminating, their commitment is virtually the same as that of equivalent stayers. The results are consistent with the fact that there are early leavers who are, in effect, in their last month of employment when they first join the organization and who thus start with fairly low commitment; and there are "late" leavers who stay a number of months before leaving and who do not appear to show a decline in commitment until close to the time they terminate. If they are at least six months away from termination they appear to be indistinguishable from stayers.

#### Sources of Organizational Attachment

It is not enough to know that people have different levels of commitment to an organization. It is necessary also to try to find out why people have the degree of commitment (or lack of it) that they do. This was the purpose of the 12-item second questionnaire designed to assess the possible sources of attachment to the organization. The findings from this questionnaire are presented in Table 3 in the form of point biserial correlations for the sample of 32 paired individuals (16 leavers and 16 stayers) on the first day and the leavers' last two months. The results for the first day administration show that only the item for "reputation of the organization" significantly

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Insert Table 3 about here  
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correlated with ultimate stay-leave decisions, with the stayers reporting that this was a stronger factor in their desire to stay



with the organization than was the case for the leavers. Most of the other items showed very little correlation with eventual leaving and several were slightly negative (i.e., the stayers indicated the factor was exerting a weaker positive effect than did the leavers). However, by the time that the stayers were in their last two months (whether this was their first month with the company or their 14<sup>th</sup>), there was a distinct trend for a number of the items to be significantly correlated in the expected positive direction.

Looking at the individual items in Table 3 (ranked in order of the point biserial correlation in the last two-month period), we can see that attitudes toward "promotion prospects" most differentiated stayers from leavers just prior to the latter's termination. This would indicate that the assessments of such prospects were probably a key factor in the decision to terminate, but we cannot know how realistic such perceptions were in individual cases. Interestingly enough, even on the first day there was a tendency (though not significant) for eventual terminators to indicate that this was not as strong a positive factor for staying for them as compared to stayers. Again, one can speculate as to whether certain self assessments as well as organizational assessments were operating even at this early date.

Other factors showing a relationship to staying or leaving during the final two months for the leavers included a mixture of immediate situational characteristics (e.g., "job duties") and more remote aspects of the environment (i.e., "the values of the organization"). What appears to emerge from Table 3 is evidence of a fairly general disaffection

with a number of aspects of the total work situation -- but not all. Even at the end the leavers were just as positive as stayers about their immediate work colleagues and still had nearly as much respect for the effectiveness of the organization, at least in terms of whether these were seen as influential in desires to stay with the company.

#### Discussion

The results of this study clearly demonstrate that management trainees who voluntarily left the organization during the initial 15-month employment period had begun to show a definite decline in their commitment to the organization prior to actually leaving it. Some even showed this relative disaffection (or, more accurately, lack of highly positive attitudes) in the first week of employment and translated this into the action of leaving quite soon (within the first couple of months). Other eventual leavers, those who terminated after six months or so, tended not to show a consistent drop until a few months prior to the point of departure, and still others never did show a drop in expressed commitment. In any event, the important point seems to be that when a marked decline in commitment starts to occur, it is likely (though obviously not invariably) signalling a voluntary termination in the near future.

A second aim of this study was also to try to determine which specific factors that might be assumed to be linked to organizational attachment would actually show the greatest changes prior to the employee's act of leaving. The evidence suggests that there is not a single factor but rather a number of factors that start to be reacted to relatively

negatively by the leavers when their attitudes are contrasted with those of the stayers. Declines set in, for leaver members of this sample, in such apparently diverse areas as promotion prospects, job duties and the perceived values of the organization. However, as noted previously, the decline was not totally undifferentiated with respect to all aspects of the situation. Thus, assessments of the effectiveness of the total organization were not related strongly at all to turnover, even though evaluations of unit effectiveness were. It is possible, though not documented in this study, that individuals may show a "spread effect" in the loss of attachment, wherein only one or a few factors are influential at first but later many or most lose their potential for holding the individual to the organization. This could be investigated in future longitudinal studies on larger turnover samples than were available in the present investigation.

Despite the fact that this study has gone beyond most previous studies in tracing the course of attitude development of employees prior to their point of voluntary departure from an organization, basic analytical questions still remain largely unanswered. The primary one is a cause-effect type of question: Do most employees exhibit this sequence: (1) decision to leave - (2) decline in commitment to the organization - (3) act of leaving? Or this sequence: (1) decline in commitment to the organization - (2) decision to leave - (3) act of leaving? It may well be that some individuals follow the first sequence and others the second. Still others may alternate back and forth between changes in commitment and tentative decisions to leave.

It would appear that what we have in most voluntary acts of termination are very complex interplays between attitudes and tentative decisions and firm decisions.

Another major type of issue that was not addressed in this research relates to the determination of the critical events in the working life of the employee that start him thinking about leaving and that start to lower his degree of commitment to the organization. Longitudinal studies of the general type illustrated here will probably be necessary to get at this question effectively, but they will need to be supplemented by interviews and observer reports in addition to periodically administered questionnaires. Despite the limitations of the present study, however, it seems evident that questionnaire data of the type obtained in this study do serve adequately to indicate that turnover trouble is ahead for the organization when expressed commitment starts to drop off. Perhaps with "early warning" systems of this sort, organizations might be able to take steps to retain at least some of their most valuable employees that would otherwise end up in the "early turnover" column of statistics.

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Table 1

## Sample Return by Questionnaire Administration Periods

	First Day	Months in the Organization							Total
		1/2	2	4	6	9	12	15	
<b>Stayers</b>									
Possible	97	103	112	113	119	119	119	119	937
Return	96	92	97	104	93	78	64	54	678
Response Rate	99.0%	89.3%	86.6%	92.0%	78.2%	65.5%	53.8%	45.4%	72.7%
<b>Leavers</b>									
Possible	32	31	33	27	26	16	10	5	194
Return	30	25	23	25	19	7	5	2	136
Response Rate	93.8%	80.6%	69.7%	92.6%	73.1%	43.8%	50.0%	40.0%	70.1%
<b>Total</b>									
Possible	129	134	145	140	145	135	129	124	1136
Return	126	117	129	129	112	89	69	56	814
Response Rate	97.7%	87.3%	82.8%	92.1%	77.2%	63.0%	53.5%	45.2%	71.3%

Table 2

## Changes in Organizational Commitment:

## First Day to Last Two Months Before Leavers Terminated

	First Day	Last 2 Months	Difference
Stayers (N = 16)	5.90	5.87	-0.03
Leavers (N = 16)	5.37	4.94	-0.43
Difference	-0.53*	-0.93*	
Point Biserial Correlations <sup>a</sup> (N = 32)			
Commitment to turnover	0.41*	0.43*	

\*p  $\leq$  .05, 1-tail test.

<sup>a</sup>Note: For point biserial correlations, staying was coded 1 and leaving was coded 0.



Table 3

**Sources of Attachment:**  
**Point Biserial Correlations for First Day**  
**and Last Two Months Before Leavers Terminate**

Sources of Attachment	First Day	Last 2 Months
My current prospects for promotion.	.23	.43*
The kinds of job duties to which I have been exposed.	.03	.38*
My feelings about the effectiveness of this particular local unit (store) of the organization.	.00	.37*
My current salary prospects.	-.12	.35*
The reaction to my performance by people at all levels of the organization.	.10	.34*
The values of the organization--what it stands for.	.14	.33*
The way in which supervision structures the work to be done.	-.21	.31
The reputation of this organization.	.40*	.24
The way in which supervision responds to the feelings of employees.	.03	.16
My feelings about the effectiveness of this organization as a whole.	-.07	.16
My immediate work colleagues.	-.21	-.11
The present geographical location of my work.	-.13	-.08
Sample Size	32	32

\* $p \leq .05$  1-tail test.

Note: Staying was coded 1 and leaving coded 0.

(Figure Caption)

Figure 1. Organizational Commitment of Stayers vs. Leavers:

Months Before Leavers Terminate

