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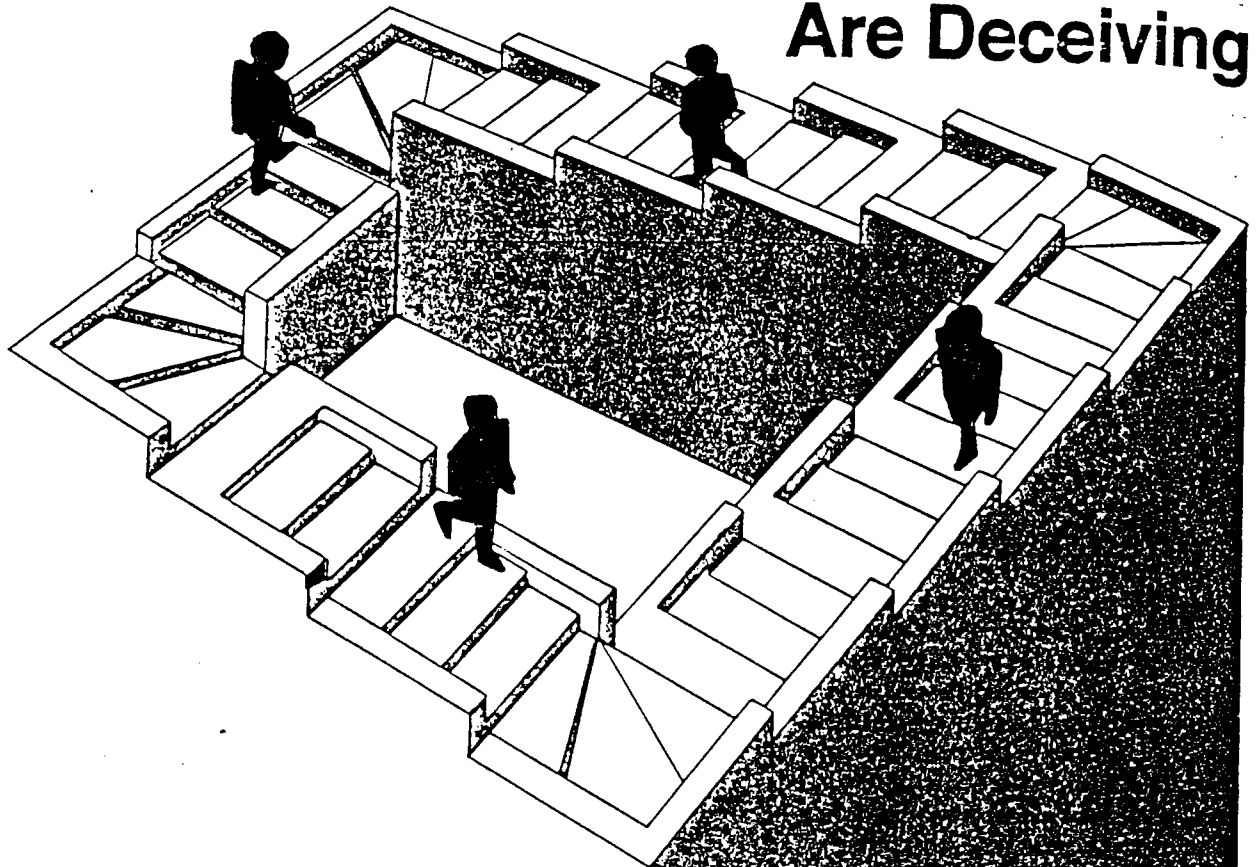
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The Impact of Teller Turnover in Banking: First Appearances Are Deceiving



ABSTRACT

Traditionally, employee turnover has been considered to be dysfunctional to the organization. Among other considerations, employee turnover may be disruptive and costly. Recent evidence, however, suggests that this view may be somewhat parochial; employee separations sometimes may be of substantial benefit to the organization. This analysis of 1,389 banking employees in western bank branches underscores that view. When the quality and replaceability of departing employees is considered, turnover can actually be a potentially positive phenomenon. In addition, the issue of turnover as either controllable or unavoidable is examined as a critical dimension of assessing the gravity of voluntary turnover. The implications of these findings, and aspects of turnover as an important hard-dollar phenomenon, are discussed.

By Dan R. Dalton,
Graduate School of Business,
Indiana University,
Bloomington, Indiana,
and
David M. Krackhardt,
Graduate School of Business and
Public Administration,
Cornell University,
Ithaca, New York,
and
Lyman W. Porter,
Graduate School of Management,
University of California,
Irvine, California.

Employee turnover has been referred to as a "... relatively clear-cut act of behavior that has potentially critical consequences for both the person and the organization" (see Porter and Steers [1973] p. 151). There is extensive evidence that this observation has had, and continues to have, wide support. It has been estimated that there are well over 1,000 articles and research reports on employee turnover (see Muchinsky and Morrow [1980] and Steers and Mowday [1981]). These works have a common thread: Turnover is a costly organizational problem and should be reduced (see Staw [1980]).

The negative aspect of employee turnover has been called "axiomatic" (see Dalton and Todor [1979] p. 225), the "*sine qua non*" of the turnover research (see Muchinsky and Tuttle [1979] p. 69).

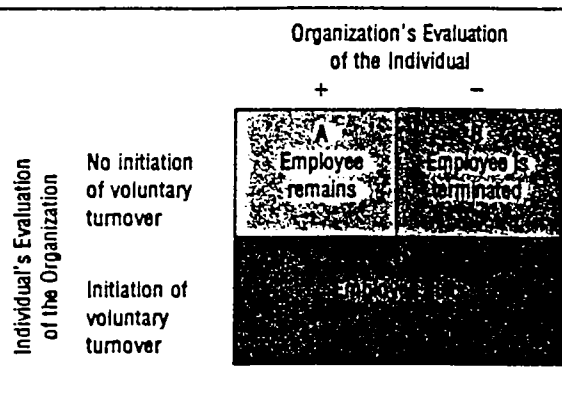
Certainly, employee turnover is associated with expense. The cost of replacing a single nonmanagerial employee has been estimated to be more than \$2,500 (see Mirvis and Lawler [1977]). Typical expenses would include recruiting, training, interruptions of normal operations, scheduling difficulties, some percentage of operating overhead and so forth. These and other costs may have even a greater impact on the banking industry, which is known for having rather (and frequently excessively) high levels of teller turnover. Indeed, a recent article on turnover stated, "waitresses and bank clerks, for instance, have characteristically high rates of turnover" (see Dalton & Todor [1982 p. 213]).

For some 75 years, the turnover picture was bleak. Virtually no one addressed what benefits, if any, might accrue to an organization because of its turnover (see Dalton and Todor [1979]). Recently, a number of theorists have argued that turnover is not inexorably dysfunctional. The remainder of this essay is directed toward an empirical investigation and discussion of several major, and potentially positive, features of employee turnover for the banking industry. These features can be separated into three relatively distinct categories:

1) An analysis of the quality and replaceability of employees who leave western bank branches is undertaken. The object is to determine what percentage, if any, of employee separations are of decided benefit to the organization;

2) The aspect of organizational control of em-

Figure 1. Traditional View of Employee Turnover.



ployee separations is examined as well. It may be that some percentage of employee turnover is simply not under the control of bank branches. It may be unavoidable. If so, resources used to reduce or minimize such turnover is money unwisely spent; and,

3) Several hard-dollar benefits which are enjoyed by the organization as a function of its turnover are reviewed.

Not How Many, But Who Is Leaving

Turnover in an organization is ordinarily evaluated by assessing its frequency. The typical question is how many people over a given period of time (usually a year) voluntarily leave. With this information, a percentage can be easily calculated as a ratio of the number of people who leave versus those who do not. The organization with a greater turnover percentage has the greater problem. While this view is widely shared, it may not be entirely accurate.

The essential question is not "how many" but "who" is leaving. A relatively low percentage of turnover, for example, could have serious effects on an organization if departing employees have special skills or information. Correspondingly, a relatively large percentage of turnover would have little impact if the persons leaving had low skills or little information.

A key, then, may be to determine the characteristics of the people who leave the organization. While this may seem intuitive, it has not been done until recently (see Dalton, Krackhardt and Porter [1981]).

Figure 1 illustrates the traditional manner in

TELLER TURNOVER

Figure 2. An Expanded View of Employee Turnover.

| | | Organization's Evaluation of the Individual | |
|---|-------------------------------------|---|---|
| | | + | - |
| Individual's Evaluation of the Organization | No initiation of voluntary turnover | A Employee remains | B Employee is terminated |
| | Initiation of voluntary turnover | C Employee quits dysfunctional turnover | D Employee quits beneficial turnover |

which employee turnover has been viewed. There are three categories: Employee remains; employee is terminated; employee quits. This seems to be an adequate classification scheme because it captures the spectrum of possibilities with respect to the relationship between an employee and the organization. In Figure 1 the organization's evaluation of the person leaving is ignored. This may be a critical exclusion.

Figure 2 includes a recent modification of that taxonomy that may lead to a more representative, balanced approach to assessing employee turnover. Except for the bottom portions, Figures 1 and 2 are identical. That difference, however, is noteworthy. Figure 2 illustrates that there are actually two kinds of voluntary turnover—dysfunctional and beneficial (see Dalton, Todor and Krackhardt [1982] and Dalton, Krackhardt and Porter [1981]).

Here (Figure 2, Cell "C"), individuals want to leave the organization. These people have voluntarily initiated their departure. Importantly, the organization would prefer to retain them. These employees are positively evaluated by the organization. These cases clearly represent turnover that is dysfunctional to the organization. Succinctly, the organization is losing employees it would prefer to keep.

Beneficial Turnover

There is another category of employees, however, that represents a different situation with entirely different effects. This case (Figure 2, Cell "D") is also characterized by individuals

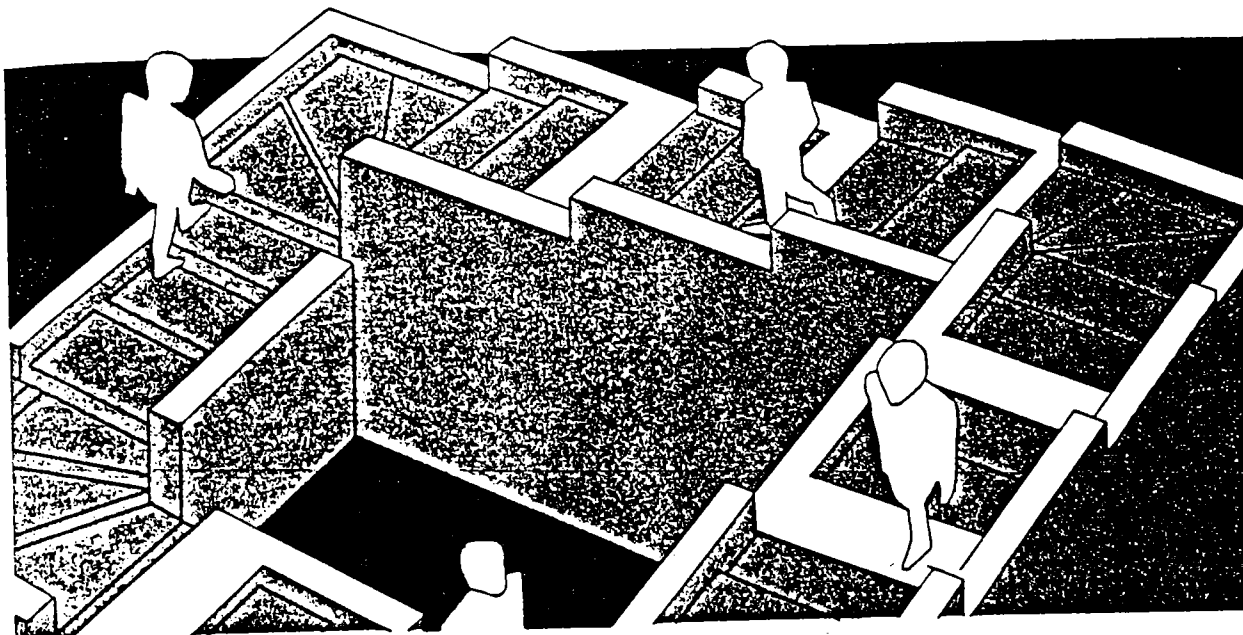
voluntarily initiating the departure. The organization, however, is unconcerned. As can be seen from Figure 2, the organization has a negative evaluation of these employees. A critical issue, then, is what portion of voluntary turnover actually benefits the organization. Presumably, any time an employee leaves who is not valued by the organization, the organization benefits. If a substantial percentage of voluntary turnover is in this category, then the traditional picture of turnover changes drastically.

Why would there be any employees in this category? It could be argued that employees who were not valued by the organization would long since have been terminated. The only exceptions would be those fortunate enough to quit in a timely manner—before they were fired.

It is, however, not at all unusual for organizations to retain people in this category. There are a host of reasons why marginal (or worse) employees would not be terminated by an organization. The social dynamics of the workplace can be seriously affected when marginal employees are asked to leave (see Muchinsky and Tuttle [1979]). These may include factors such as organizational climate and group cohesion. Anytime someone is forced to leave the organization, there are consequences for those who remain. Remaining coworkers may reevaluate their positions within the organization.

While sound, these concerns are unlikely to be the primary reason organizations hesitate to dismiss marginal employees. In almost all organizations there is some form of employment security. This is widespread in the private and public sectors. Labor unions, for example, routinely provide contractually specific job security provisions for their members. Beyond this, termination decisions made by an organization are subject to review. This may be in the form of a formal grievance. Even outside an organized labor context, there are employee associations, administrative appeal boards or their equivalents that provide the right to "appeal" for dismissed employees. Organizations do not normally retain an absolute, unilateral right to dismiss employees.

The notion of "tenure" for educators provides an illustration. In schools at all levels, instructors have institutionalized job security. It is not certain that, if some of these teachers left their school, irreparable harm would be done to



the school. In fact, some might argue that, at times, the departure of some instructors might be healthy for the organization.

Job security, as a function of collective bargaining agreements, provides another example. Employees under such contracts may never commit or omit any behavior that is, in and of itself, sufficient cause for dismissal. This, however, does not mean that such employees are indispensable to the organization or even highly valued by it.

The fundamental issue here is what portion of the employees who do voluntarily leave could be considered as beneficial to the organization. Simply, how often is the organization actually better off because a person or persons have chosen to leave?

Another Concern: The Issue of Control

Since the turn of the century, private and public organizations at all levels have been keenly interested in the turnover phenomenon. This interest has been largely pragmatic. Most research conducted in this area was to determine the antecedents of turnover so that it could be reduced.

For turnover to be reduced, it must be under the control of the organization. Any portion of "voluntary turnover"—quitting—that is not under control cannot be reduced. It has been suggested that many forms of voluntary employee turnover are essentially unavoidable (see

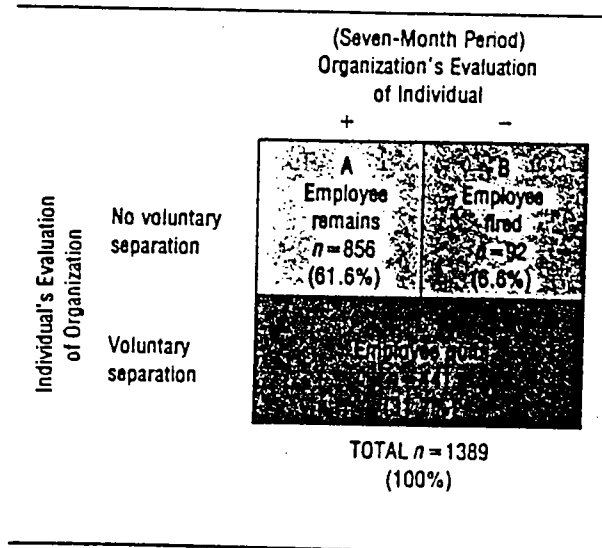
Dalton, Todor and Krackhardt [1982]). Among these might be employees leaving the organization when their spouses are transferred, for educational and, health matters and, less frequently, through employee deaths. In theory, with the obvious exception of employee death, no turnover is unavoidable. Organizations have the wherewithal to prevent most employees from quitting if the organization chooses to use its resources in this manner. Organizations could make the proverbial "offer you cannot refuse" to employees and retain them. As a practical matter, however, the types of turnover we have identified, among others, are basically unavoidable. As Dalton and Todor (1979) have noted, "It may be far less expensive to cope with turnover than to prevent it" (p. 226).

The point is that resources expended to reduce turnover that is uncontrollable in a practical sense constitute money wasted. An organization should have a clear idea of the portion of turnover that is unavoidable before it embarks on a vigorous program to reduce turnover. Many organizations do not know why employees choose to leave. Even so, programs are instituted, sometimes at great expense, to reduce the incidence of employee turnover.

This research, then, addresses two central questions with respect to voluntary turnover: 1) What portion of voluntary turnover is actually beneficial to the organization? And 2) What portion of voluntary turnover is essentially unavoidable?

TELLER TURNOVER

Figure 3. Traditional Classification of Turnover.



METHOD

Termination records were collected on 1,389 tellers at 190 bank branches over a seven-month period. The immediate supervisor of each departing employee was required by the bank to complete termination forms from which it was determined whether the employee left voluntarily (quit) or was dismissed. In addition, the supervisor was asked to fill out a form on each departing teller that included the following items:

- 1) Would you rehire this person to work for you?
 - a. I would definitely hire this person to work for me again.
 - b. I would slightly prefer to hire this person (rather than someone else) to work for me again.
 - c. I am indifferent as to whether this person ever works for me again.
 - d. I would prefer to hire someone else to work for me.
 - e. Under no circumstances would I hire this person to work for me again.
- 2) How would you rate this person's performance as a teller while he or she was working for you?
 - a. Inadequate; clearly failed to meet minimum job requirements.
 - b. Generally adequate; met most job requirements; however, required close supervision.
 - c. Competent; met all requirements; required only minimal supervision.
 - d. High quality work; exceeded most requirements; made a valuable contribution and showed initiative.
 - e. Exceptional; consistently demonstrated outstanding performance.
- 3) In general, how easy would it be to find someone who would do as good a job as this person did?
 - a. Very easy
 - b. Somewhat easy
 - c. Somewhat difficult
 - d. Very difficult

This information was then collapsed into two dichotomous metrics to represent the organization's evaluation of the departing employee (see Dalton, et. al. [in press]):

Quality of Employee. If the supervisor indicated that s/he would prefer to hire someone else (responses "d" or "e") in question 1; OR if the supervisor rated the employee as "inadequate" on question 2, then the employee was considered low quality. Otherwise, the employee was considered acceptable or high quality.

Replaceability of Employee. If the supervisor indicated that an employee would be at least "somewhat easy" to replace (question 3, "a" or "b"), then the employee was considered easily replaced. Any other responses were interpreted to mean that the employee would be "difficult" to replace.

Employees were then placed into one of the cells suggested by Figures 1 and 2. Inasmuch as there were two independent evaluative measures (employee "quality" and employee "replaceability"), separate frequency tables were formed.

Also, individual separation forms were examined to identify the reason for the voluntary turnover (e.g., retirement, health, family, commitment, etc.) to determine which separations were potentially under the control of the organization.

RESULTS

Figure 3 represents the results by the traditional categorization of employee turnover as being either "voluntary" or "involuntary." Approximately 32% of the employees voluntarily left the

