It's Not You, It's Me: An Inductive Exploration of Employee Accounts for Quitting

by
Emily Neaves

A THESIS

submitted to

Oregon State University

Honors College

in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the
degree of

Honors Baccalaureate of Science in Biochemistry & Biophysics
(Honors Scholar)

Presented June 2, 2017
Commencement June 2017

AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

Emily Neaves for the degree of <u>Honors Baccalaureate of Science in Biochemistry & Biophysics</u> presented on June 2, 2017. Title: <u>It's Not You, It's Me: An Inductive Exploration of Employee Accounts for Quitting</u>.

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Anthony Klotz

A great deal of prior research has investigated the nature, causes, and consequences of voluntary employee turnover. However, one critical and seldom explored facet of this process is the exit interview – a tool that many companies use to gain insight into why an employee is quitting his or her job. Moreover, prior literature has largely assumed that employees are honest in exit interviews, despite the fact that there are many reasons that employees may be motivated to be dishonest in their exit interview process. As such, the effectiveness of exit interviews is not well understood. In this study, I explore how often employees provide false reasons for their resignation when they quit, and inductively identify a taxonomy that captures the reasons why employees are dishonest in exit interviews among a sample of individuals who had recently resigned from a job in the last 12 months. My results indicate that employees' reasons for lying fall within nine different categories and that wanting to keep a good reference and avoiding upsetting managerial staff were the most common reasons.

Key Words: Exit interview, voluntary turnover, dishonesty

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<u>Honors Baccalaureate of Science in Biochemistry & Biophysics</u> project of Emily Neaves presented on June 2, 2017.

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I understand that my project will become part of the permanent collection of Oregon State University, Honors College. My signature below authorizes release of my project to any reader upon request.

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Emily Neaves, Author

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Abstract

A great deal of prior research has investigated the nature, causes, and consequences of voluntary employee turnover. However, one critical and seldom explored facet of this process is the exit interview – a tool that many companies use to gain insight into why an employee is quitting his or her job. Moreover, prior literature has largely assumed that employees are honest in exit interviews, despite the fact that there are many reasons that employees may be motivated to be dishonest in their exit interview process. As such, the effectiveness of exit interviews is not well understood. In this study, I explore how often employees provide false reasons for their resignation when they quit, and inductively identify a taxonomy that captures the reasons why employees are dishonest in exit interviews among a sample of individuals who had recently resigned from a job in the last 12 months. My results indicate that employees' reasons for lying fall within nine different categories and that wanting to keep a good reference and avoiding upsetting managerial staff were the most common reasons.

Introduction

Quitting a job is something almost every individual experiences some time in their life. In the United States alone, 36,091,000 people quit their jobs in 2016 and the voluntary turnover rate is increasing every year (Bureau of Labor Statistics). Voluntary turnover occurs when an employee willingly chooses to leave their position with their employer. Employee turnover can have positive influences on the organization, such as the infusion of new ideas or increased opportunities within the company (Johns & Johnson, 2005), but in general, employee turnover is seen as harmful to organizational functioning because a high voluntary turnover rate can be damaging for any company no matter the situation. Turnover is not only bad for company morale due to the increased

burden it places on remaining workers, but it is also very costly when considering the administrative costs of hiring and training a new person, and the indirect costs of having to combat loss of productivity from personnel who knew the person resigning from the company (Feinberg & Jeppeson, 2000).

An immense amount of research has examined why people leave their jobs. The main predictor of voluntary turnover and therefore the focus of most scholarly attention is job satisfaction (Klotz & Zimmerman, 2015). Other factors such as company commitment, job availability, comparison of alternatives, salary, and outside commitments also relate to whether someone will leave their job (Griffeth, Hom, & Gaertner, 2000). Characteristics of the work environment, such as job content, stress level, work group cohesion, autonomy, leadership, and opportunities for promotion also contribute to employees' intentions to quit and turnover in general (Griffeth et al., 2000). Whether an employee quits their job because it is too stressful, because they are not getting paid enough, or because they want to go back to school, it is in the company's best interest to determine the true reason why they quit. That is, if companies understand why their employees quit, they can make evidence-based improvements to reduce the likelihood that more employees will leave in the future.

Due to the destructive nature of a high turnover rate, most organizations will do whatever they can to understand why employees are leaving their organization. The research literature is not clear about what data should be gathered during an employee's resignation and companies develop their own plans for how to deal with a departing employee; therefore, resignation procedures tend to vary across different companies (Giacalone, 1997). Unfortunately, this lack of uniformity in the resignation process prevents employers from always knowing why an employee quits their job. One way organizations try to combat this problem is through exit interviews, which can be a crucial source of intelligence in reducing turnover (Feinberg & Jeppeson, 2000).

Exit interviews are interviews or surveys given to employees who have announced their resignation from an organization. In most cases, employees provide more than one week of notice after they have announced their resignation (Klotz & Bolino, 2016), so an exit interview can be conducted during this time. Businesses use exit

interviews as a tool to assess an employee's overall satisfaction and determine their reasons for leaving. It opens a discussion as to how a company can improve on matters ranging from work environment to company policies. The information provided can potentially give any company insight into how they can improve employee productivity, satisfaction, and engagement, as well as produce a lower turnover rate.

The use of exit interviews is widespread and most organizations use exit interviews in the fight against turnover (Kiechel, 1990). Although exit interviews/conversations are one of the key ways through which organizations learn how to improve and take their company to the next level, they are both timely and expensive. Not only does it take time to interview someone, it also requires resources to analyze and study the responses at a later time, yet many companies still use exit interviews consistently.

There is an inherent assumption amongst most employers that when giving an exit interview, resigning employees will be truthful and that the information managers glean from the exit interviews can be used to make changes and reduce costs (Giacalone, 1997). However, the findings of some research has suggested that even if employers give a formal exit interview, or an informal one in which they get a chance to talk to the employee, it is unclear whether or not employees will tell the truth (Giacalone, 1997; Hinrichs 1971, 1975; Lefkowitz & Katz, 1969; Zarandona & Camuso, 1985). Once an employee lies during their exit conversation, the organization is no longer gaining anything useful from the employee's resignation and any attempts to reduce turnover based on the information from the exit interview will not be valid (Feinberg & Jeppeson, 2000). Indeed, if an organization enacts sweeping changes in the workplace in response to the false feedback received in exit interviews, it could cause substantial harm to the firm.

The last conversation an employee has with their employer before departing the company is most likely the final interaction the individual has with their employer and a person has many good reasons to not be honest in that situation (Klotz & Bolino, 2016). Research has suggested that some of the information retrieved from exit interviews is not always valid due to the employees being dishonest in their answering of the questions.

Scholars understand and most people can assume that employees are dishonest because they want to keep a good reference and not burn a bridge. While this is true, there are a multitude of other reasons that people may be less than totally honest during their exit interviews/conversations. For example, an employee might avoid being honest because they want to maintain their reputation within the company and community. Moreover, employees might also be dishonest so that they avoid confrontation with their boss or avoid any discomfort with fellow employees. Finally, employees might not tell the truth because they want to be polite or they want to avoid any further discussion of their resignation.

In sum, prior research has tended to highlight the importance of exit interviews, and has largely assumed that they can help companies improve their turnover rate. Although researchers have acknowledged that exit interviews are not necessarily valid, prior work has not examined the frequency with which employees are dishonest when they quit, or more importantly, empirically shown the reasons underlying employee's lack of honesty in the resignation process. As such, when examining the costs and consequences of voluntary turnover, researchers should not only consider the impact of people being dishonest but also contemplate the reasons why people do not always tell the truth.

Thus, the purpose of this study is to gain an initial understanding of how frequently employees are dishonest when leaving, and why they choose to not tell the truth. These results should provide companies with some guidance as to where they should focus their efforts to increase employee satisfaction and potentially lower turnover rates. It will also give these companies some direction about how they should conduct their exit surveys to get the most honest answers.

Methods

Data collection and analysis. I used Amazon's Mechanical Turk to find 366 adults in the U.S. who had resigned from full-time employment in the prior 12 months. Participants were given the link to an online Qualtrics survey. After reading an

information sheet that contained background information about the study (OSU IRB, Study ID 7811), they agreed to participate. They were asked a series of open and close-ended questions about their resignation. The questions were developed based on personal experience with the resignation process and literature review of previous exit interview processes. To help control bias associated with retrospective reporting, respondents indicated the degree to which they could recall their resignation using a 5-point scale (1= strongly disagree; 5= strongly agree). Of the 366 respondents who agreed to participate, 301 participants were able to successfully recall their resignation (mean= 4.45), leading to an 82% response rate. Respondents' mean age was 32.4 years, and 63% were male.

Initial determination of dishonesty when resigning. A one-item survey question asking the respondents about whether or not they told the truth when talking to their supervisors about why they were leaving revealed that of the 301 responses, 91 or 30% of employees did not tell the truth when discussing the reasons they left their job.

Inductive development of reasoning. In order to determine the different reasons employees did not tell the truth when they resigned, I inductively coded the responses. Initially, I used open coding to create preliminary categories based on similar answers and explanations found in the data. During the data analysis, I frequently returned to previously coded responses to check for consistency or to recode them based on a new, upgraded code. Toward the end of the initial data coding, a point was reached where virtually all new data could be categorized within existing codes and the coding process moved from open and in vivo coding into focused coding (Klotz & Bolino, 2016).

Results

The nine distinct reasons for being dishonest during exit interviews that emerged from this analysis were labeled by *reference*, *unnecessary*, *avoid upsetting management*, *avoid confrontation*, *management problem*, *futile*, *avoid further discussion*, *appearances*, and *self-preservation.* Table 1 reports the frequency of each of these nine reasons in this sample. Table 2 provides the definitions of each reason and reports some of the rich and insightful descriptions that respondents gave regarding their reasons for not telling the truth as to why they quit their jobs.

Table 1
Outcomes of Categorized Reasons

Reason	Number	Percentage
Reference	18	19.78%
Avoid upsetting management	15	16.48%
Unnecessary	14	15.39%
Avoid confrontation	13	14.29%
Management problem	11	12.09%
Futile	9	9.89%
Avoid further discussion	5	5.50%
Appearances	3	3.30%
Self-preservation	3	3.30%

Representing 19.8% of the resignations in the sample, *reference* reasons were characterized by employees not telling the truth so as to secure a good reference by not burning a bridge. Reasons were typified by statements such as this: "I was worried it would hurt me in the future if I complained and I wanted to leave on good terms."

Employees being less than truthful about why they quit in order to avoid upsetting management represents 16.5% of the sample. Generally, these people lied because they did not want to offend their manager or put any blame onto management. Most of the employees did not want to be unkind to the person with whom they were discussing their resignation. One respondent explained, "We have worked together for 16 years. She was a friend as well as a boss. She groomed me for many years. I did not want to hurt her feelings and tell her I was not retiring and I needed to advance myself so one day I could retire."

Table 2
Descriptors and Evidence of Categorized Reasons

Reason	Illustration
Reference *Typified by an employee being dishonest to secure a good future reference*	"I did not want to compromise any future reference I might need." "Because I didn't want a bad reference if it was possible to avoid. I don't think burning a bridge is a good way to leave a job, especially when I was going to be looking for work immediately afterwards" "I did not want to poison the well with my former employer. It could also lead them to give me a bad reference."
Unnecessary *Typified by an employee feeling that the truth was unnecessary or felt that the management knowing the truth was inappropriate*	"I mostly felt it wasn't their business and all they needed to know was that I was resigning." "I didn't give her the real reason, because she didn't know me, and didn't deserve to know why I was leaving." "It was none of their business, really."
Avoid upsetting management *Characterized by employees being dishonest to avoid upsetting management*	"I didn't want him to feel like he was responsible in any way. He was also fairly new, and I didn't want to discourage him for the sake of the team members that remained." "I did not want to make it sound like it was directly caused by her, and was the only reason I was leaving. It was one of the reasons, but I know she would have taken it really personally, and I did not want to make her feel bad about it, which would have happened. I did not dislike her personally and I could see she was struggling with her new responsibilities." "I did not want to make them [managers] feel bad or uncomfortable, I felt that would serve no purpose as I was leaving anyway."
Avoid confrontation *Characterized by employees wanting to avoid confrontation*	"I didn't tell the real reason because I do not like confrontation." "I just thought it would be better for everyone to avoid any kind of confrontation." "I didn't want to deal with any conflict. I simply wanted to leave. I knew there was no changing the situation so the best course of action for me was to remove myself from it."
Management Problem *Employees not feeling free to be honest because the management was the reason for their resignation*	"I was worried about my manager's possible reaction to the real reason I was resigning." "She had the personality of a pit viper and honestly the easier I could make this on myself, after many years of dealing with her attitude, the better." "They were part of the problem"

Futile *Characterized by employees feeling like their honesty wouldn't change/help anything*	"I did not tell them how unhappy I was because they are cold and uncaring people that only speak in the language of money. Anything else you say, they can't hear. It would be a waste of precious breath." "I chose not to report the real reason as I had gone back and forth with the HR director about my issues and it just never worked out so I felt it was better to just leave it out when resigning." "I did not let my manager know because I knew they would not care as they had huge turnover for years and despite me being there for three years it would be nothing to them."
Avoid further discussion *Characterized by an employee being dishonest in order to avoid any further discussion about their resignation*	"I didn't want to get into all the details with them. I knew that if I told them the real reason that I wanted to quit they would try to talk me out of it so I didn't go that route. I was really set on leaving and I didn't want to discuss it any further with management." "Well because they would have made an excuse up. And be trying to say things to get me to stay." "I don't like getting into sensitive topics like cultural barriers, and if I did he would certainly try really hard to get me to stay."
Appearances *Exemplified by employees that are dishonest in order to maintain the appearance of themselves or people close to them*	"I had other family members employed by the same company and didn't want to spoil the company's perception of my family." "I did not want to sound weak, unable to do the job, or start a worker's comp case." "I didn't want to sound weak"
Self-preservation *Characterized by employees being dishonest in order to preserve their emotional wellbeing*	"Both because I wanted my reason to empower me and make them feel like I didn't need them, and also because the information I had learned was privileged and didn't want to put anyone else at risk by letting on that I knew." "I just felt it wasn't in my best interest to do so." "Fearful of situation"

The *unnecessary* reason, used by 15.4% of the respondents, describes employees who did not tell the truth because they did not think the company/organization they worked for needed the information (e.g., "I didn't find it necessary to tell him. I was leaving no matter what."). They felt like telling the truth was inappropriate and they generally thought that their management staff did not deserve to know and should stay out of their business. In short, those who used *unnecessary* explanations appeared to feel that the reasons behind their resignation was private.

The *unnecessary* reasoning goes hand in hand with the *futile* descriptor. The 9.9% of employees who fall under this category believed that not telling the truth would not change or help anything. They generally felt as though they had exhausted all their efforts in trying to make a change, and trying to be truthful at the end would be pointless because they felt like what they had to say would "fall on deaf ears". For example, one respondent explained: "I had little reason to think that giving much in the way of specifics would change anything for the better. I've usually tried to leave employers with a certain amount of professionalism and I also feel that giving unsolicited advice is ineffective."

Avoiding further discussion was the reason 5.5% of respondents did not tell the truth when resigning. This reason was usually characterized by employees not wanting to discuss their resignation any further either to avoid trying to be convinced to stay, or to refrain from having to discuss fixing the problems. This category was typified by statements such as: "I only gave them a partial explanation. It wasn't worth the emotional burden to further open up to them about what a crummy job it was."

The final two reasons for being dishonest, *appearances* and *self-preservation*, describe the fewest number of participants' espoused excuses for quitting. The low rates of these reasons are probably due to the fact that these are special circumstances where the employees are somehow keeping in contact with that company/organization after their resignation. Situations like this can happen if the company is a big part of the community, or if they still have relatives working for the firm. One respondent who used the *appearances* approach explained, "I had other family members employed by the same company and didn't want to spoil the company's perception of my family." The *self-preservation* reason is also rare because it is usually characterized by people feeling that

their well-being is under attack and they must do what they can to get out of the situation unscathed (e.g., "I just felt it wasn't in my best interest to do so.", "Fearful of situation").

The mean age, gender, and job satisfaction score were looked at in comparison to the different reasons for dishonesty. Unfortunately, with nine groups across a sample of 91 people, there was not sufficient power to detect any statistically significant effects regarding how those who used certain reasons for quitting differed from others. Indeed, as displayed in Table 3, and shown in Figures 1, 2, and 3 there are differences in age, gender, and job satisfaction by group, but the sample size is too small to draw any valid conclusions from them.

Table 3
Numbers, Means, Standard Deviations of Differences Relative to Reason for Quitting

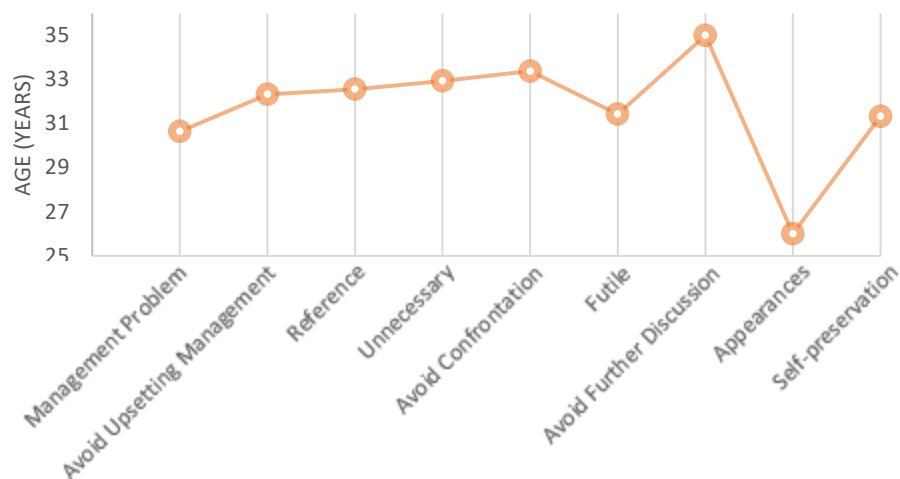| Reason	Number (N)	Average Age	Std. Dev.	Average Gender (1=female, 2= male)	Std. Dev.	Average Job Satisfaction	Std. Dev.
1: Management Problem	11	30.64	8.286	1.55	.522	4.8000	1.30231
2: Avoid upsetting management	15	32.33	10.621	1.60	.507	4.3692	1.27501
3: Reference	18	32.56	6.905	1.72	.461	4.7625	1.24197
4: Unnecessary	16	32.94	8.970	1.50	.516	4.0533	1.17708
5: Avoid Confrontation	13	33.38	11.303	1.38	.506	4.9400	1.41122
6: Futile	7	31.43	5.159	1.71	.488	5.4857	1.45537
7: Avoid further discussion	5	35.00	9.381	1.40	.548	5.0667	.80829
8: Appearances	3	26.00	1.000	1.67	.577	4.2667	1.72434
9: Self-preservation	3	31.33	7.506	1.67	.577	5.2000	1.58745
Total	91	32.26	8.602	1.57	.498	4.6667	1.30537

Figure 1: Mean Age By Reason
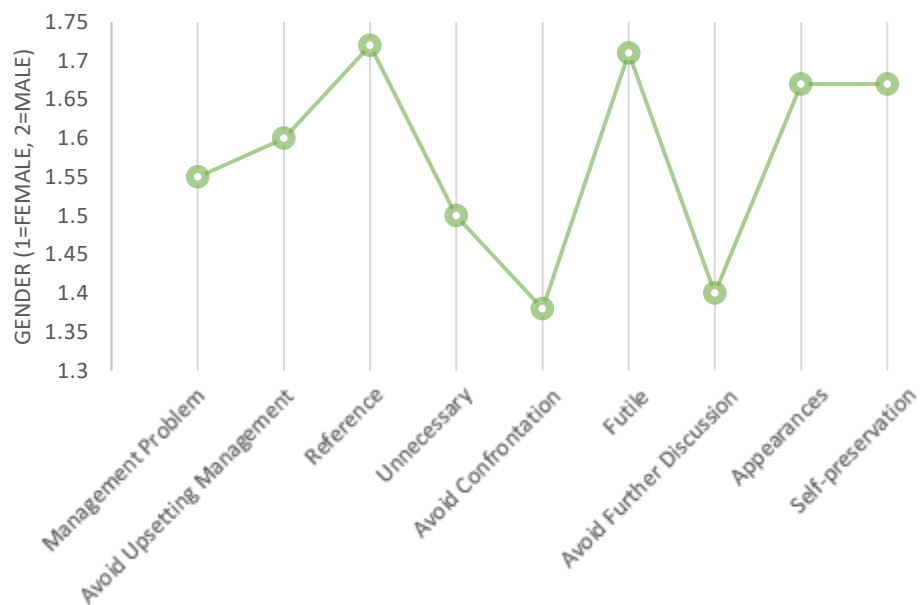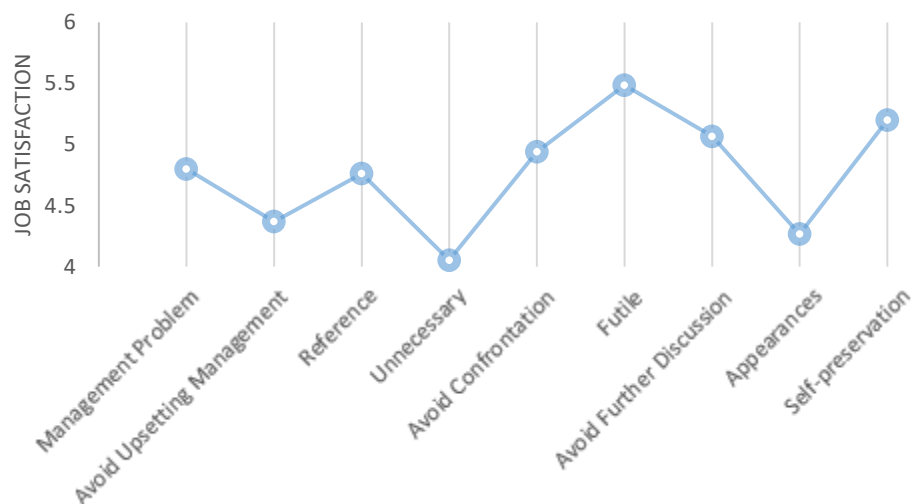

Figure 2: Mean Gender by Reason

Figure 3: Mean Job Satisfaction by Reason

Discussion

In this paper, I used qualitative methods to identify nine unique reasons that employees have for not telling the truth when giving their resignations. Based on the data I collected, around 30% of people are not honest during their formal or informal exit interview. This is detrimental for most companies who rely on exit interviews to understand why people are leaving their organization because it means that nearly a third of their interviews do not provide valid information. Based on the responses I gathered and analyzed, employees have many good reasons to be dishonest in their interviews and will continue doing so unless something in the resignation process changes.

Most scholarly work that discusses validity of exit interviews mentions that dishonesty most likely stems from an employee wanting to keep a good reference. While our data did reveal that the desire to keep a good reference and not burn a bridge is the most common reason that employees do not tell the truth in their exit conversations, it only represented around 20% of the sample. There are a multitude of other reasons that people lie during their exit interviews/conversations and limiting the research to only looking at the reference reasoning for dishonesty is doing nothing to help improve the resignation process.

My results indicated that another major reason that departing employees are dishonest is because they want to avoid upsetting their managers. Supervisors often develop close working relationships with their employees and may be both personally and professionally affected by an employee's decision to resign (Klotz & Bolino, 2016). Employee resignations are likely to trigger emotional reactions on the part of the supervisors and supervisors may react negatively to the news that one of their employees is resigning because they might blame themselves. Typically, the employee-supervisor relationship is a relationship that requires both participants to put time and effort into developing. Having to end that relationship is hard especially if the supervisor is not to blame for the employee wanting to leave their job. Rather than announcing the truth concerning why they are quitting, departing employees may instead choose to lie and offer a more acceptable explanation for their resignation, in order to preserve the best possible relationship with their boss (Klotz & Zimmerman, 2015).

Another interesting revelation was that 16% of the employees in the sample did not provide honest information to their employers about their departure because they lacked motivation. The lack of motivation stemmed from a belief that a recitation of actual problems within the organization would have no direct, personal relevance and there would be no personal benefit from changes resulting from honest responses (Giacalone, 1997). For a person to provide honest information to their management staff about why they quit their job, they have to be motivated to do so. The employees who fell under the *unnecessary* category were not motivated to provide the organization with appropriate and accurate feedback. They did not feel like they needed to provide information to their company and that they did not deserve to know anything about them. They were concerned about their privacy and did not want their company to intrude any more than they already had.

Another reason that employees were not honest during their departures stemmed from the belief that the information an employee provides will never be used by the company to implement policy changes or to create a more efficient workplace; therefore, to these individuals, giving honest answers seems like a waste of effort and time (Giacalone, 1997). Ten percent of the individuals in my study sample had this mentality. These individuals did not feel that what they had to say would change anything and they did not want to waste their time trying to help a company that did not want to be helped.

Research has shown, and my results further back-up, the belief that exit interviews have relatively low validity. Because of this idea becoming more recognized and widespread, companies and researchers are trying a new triangulation approach for understanding the reasons for employees' departures (Klotz & Zimmerman, 2015). Instead of merely relying on the exit interview as a source of information, co-workers, managers, and human resources personnel are also interviewed in an attempt to find out the true reasons why an employee has left with the hope that more valid information will be gathered (Klotz & Zimmerman, 2015).

Another step companies can take to address certain reasons for dishonesty while quitting, such as the *unnecessary*, *futile*, *appearances*, and *self-preservation* reasoning, is to change the perception of the exit interview. Employees should feel comfortable with

their exit conversation and feel that their ideas are not only welcome but encouraged. Employers need to insist on the importance of their employees' opinions and they need to help their employees understand the significance of the information they get from the exit interview.

Another way companies can reduce the amount of dishonest responding from departing employees is to change the design and structure of the voluntary turnover process within the company by ensuring the confidentiality and anonymity of the exit interview conversation. Employees need to know that their responses will be anonymous and that they will not be linked to the answers they give in their exit interviews. Ideally, it would be best to have a neutral person who is trained on how to properly interview someone, but it is understandable that someone like that may not exist in certain companies or situations (Giacalone & Duhon, 1991). It would also be a good idea to develop an anonymous survey that can either take the place of an exit interview or supplement it. This would increase anonymity and allow employees to be more honest and open.

Limitations

There were some possible limitations during this study that should mentioned. The findings may be affected by retrospective sensemaking because respondents reported their experiences and attitudes about their departure from an organization that occurred up to 12 months earlier. However, to alleviate this possible problem, as I had mentioned earlier, I had respondents indicate the extent to which they agreed that they could clearly recall their resignation experience. Additionally, as indicated by prior research, resignation is an emotionally charged event for employees and an employee's actions and attitudes during the resignation process should stand out in his or her memories (Klotz & Zimmerman, 2015). Nonetheless, future research should study resignations in samples of workers who have recently resigned in a shorter timeframe than 12 months.

Although I questioned the respondents about their personality in order to see if there was a connection between what reasons a person has for lying and their personality traits, I was not able to conclude anything due to the non-significant findings likely caused by the small sample size relative to the number of categories that inductively

emerged from the data. Future research should examine the personality factors and their contribution to reasoning with a larger sample in order to better understand the factors that drive resigning workers to provide one false reason versus another.

Conclusions

Voluntary turnover is a problem that almost every company or organization faces. It can be harmful to both a company's budget and its employees' morale. A great deal of research has gone into why people leave their jobs and companies do everything they can to understand more about that so as to improve their company in any way they can. It has come to the attention of researchers and companies alike that employees do not always tell the truth when they describe the reasoning behind their departures. As a result, we do not understand the multitude of reasons people are not honest in their exit interviews.

Overall, there many reasons employees had for being dishonest, but keeping a good reference and having a desire to not upset the management were the most common reasons. The other reasons: *unnecessary*, *futile*, *avoid confrontation*, *management problem*, *appearances*, *self-preservation*, and *avoid further discussion*, although different in nature, can possibly be changed or alleviated by a change of perspective or structure of exit interviews. Overall, I was able to develop a more refined understanding of what drives employees to be less than honest during their exit interviews. I extended the understanding of the turnover process by exploring the various reasons people give for not telling their managers the real reasons they quit and contributed to the wealth of knowledge concerning the resignation process.

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