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Job Insecurity, Perceived Organizational Support, and Emotional Intelligence as Predictors of Turnover Intention Among Academic and Non-Academic Staff in Nigerian Universities

[1.]Obina John [2.]Ojo Adeshina Akinwumi (PhD).
Telephone:+234-703-247-4755
Email: [1.]Senjohn64@gmail.com
[2.]Pivotwws1@gmail.com
Department of Psychology
Faculty of Management and Social Sciences
Lead City University,Ibadan,Nigeria.

Corresponding Author: [1.]Obina John
+234-703-247-4755
Email: Senjohn64@gmail.com

Abstract

The departure of experienced staff from Nigerian universities has become a matter of public concern, yet little is known about the psychological conditions under which university employees begin to consider leaving. This study examined job insecurity, perceived organizational support, and emotional intelligence as predictors of turnover intention among academic and non-academic staff. A cross-sectional survey with multistage sampling collected data from 385 employees of a federal, a state, and a private university in Oyo State, Nigeria. Participants completed the Job Insecurity Scale, the short form of the Survey of Perceived Organizational Support, the Wong and Law Emotional Intelligence Scale, and the six-item Turnover Intention Scale. In hierarchical regression, demographic variables explained 1.5% of the variance in turnover intention, $p = .344$, although academic staff reported slightly stronger intentions to leave than non-academic staff. The three psychological predictors added 28.5% of explained variance, $\Delta F(3, 376) = 51.03$, $p < .001$, Cohen's $f^2 = 0.41$. Job insecurity was by far the strongest predictor ($\beta = .38$, $sr^2 = .119$), uniquely explaining more variance than perceived organizational support ($\beta = -.19$) and emotional intelligence ($\beta = -.13$) combined. The results suggest that, for this workforce, thoughts of leaving are driven chiefly by uncertainty about the future of the job, with institutional support and personal emotional competence playing smaller protective roles. Retention policy in Nigerian universities is therefore likely to depend on reducing employment uncertainty, not on welfare gestures or individual training alone.

Keywords: turnover intention, job insecurity, perceived organizational support, emotional intelligence, university employees, Nigeria

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Introduction

Few problems in Nigerian higher education draw as much public comment as the loss of staff. Public universities have long struggled with inadequate funding, staff shortages, frequent strikes, poor infrastructure, and the movement of experienced personnel to other sectors and abroad (Ogunode & Lawan, 2020). Private universities face their own version of the problem, since their fixed-term contracts and tuition-dependent finances leave employees with a less certain future. Each departure takes with it teaching capacity and institutional memory that take years to rebuild.

Actual turnover is difficult to study before it happens, so researchers commonly examine turnover intention, an employee's conscious and deliberate willingness to leave the organization (Tett & Meyer, 1993). Intention is the most proximal psychological antecedent of voluntary exit in the major turnover models (Mobley, 1977), and meta-analytic evidence identifies it as one of the strongest single predictors of actual leaving (Griffeth et al., 2000). Intentions are not always carried out (Cohen et al., 2016), but employees who often think about leaving tend to withdraw effort while they stay, so the intention matters in its own right.

This study asked which of three conditions best accounts for turnover intention among Nigerian university employees: the threat of losing the job or its valued features, the belief that the institution does not value its staff, or a lack of personal emotional competence. Each points to a different remedy.

Turnover as Withdrawal From an Exchange

March and Simon (1958) framed the decision to leave as the joint product of the desirability of leaving and the perceived ease of movement. Process models describe a sequence running from dissatisfaction through thoughts of quitting and search to exit (Mobley, 1977), and the unfolding model adds that many departures are triggered by shocks, such as a missed promotion or an abrupt policy change (Lee & Mitchell, 1994). In each account, the formation of an intention to leave is the point at which an employee's evaluation of the job becomes a disposition to act on it.

Social exchange theory explains why evaluations of the employer matter. Employees who believe the organization is meeting its obligations feel bound to reciprocate with continued membership, while those who perceive that the organization has failed them feel released from that obligation (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). The psychological contract literature makes the same point at the level of specific promises: perceived breach of the employer's obligations is reliably associated with stronger intentions to leave (Zhao et al., 2007). This has been observed among Nigerian lecturers specifically. Kanu et al. (2022) found that perceived psychological contract breach was associated with stronger turnover intentions among lecturers in private universities, with organizational climate moderating the relationship.

Job Insecurity

Job insecurity, the perceived powerlessness to maintain desired continuity in a threatened job (Greenhalgh & Rosenblatt, 1984), includes both the threat of losing the job itself and the threat of losing valued features of it (Hellgren et al., 1999). In conservation of resources theory, the threatened loss of a central resource is stressful in itself, and people facing such a threat act to protect their remaining resources (Hobfoll, 1989; Hobfoll et al., 2018). Leaving an insecure job before the threat materializes is one such protective move.

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The empirical record supports this reasoning. Meta-analyses report consistent positive associations between job insecurity and turnover intention (Jiang & Lavaysse, 2018; Sverke et al., 2002). In Nigerian universities, quantitative threats are most visible among private-university staff on renewable contracts and among state-university employees whose salaries are paid irregularly. Qualitative threats, including suspended allowances, frozen promotions, and deteriorating facilities, extend across the whole sector.

Perceived Organizational Support

Perceived organizational support refers to employees' global belief that the organization values their contributions and cares about their well-being (Eisenberger et al., 1986). Because it creates a felt obligation to the organization, support should reduce the desire to leave, and meta-analyses confirm that it is negatively associated with withdrawal intentions and actual turnover (Kurtessis et al., 2017; Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002). Longitudinal and multi-sample evidence shows that support reduces turnover partly through its effects on commitment and satisfaction (Allen et al., 2003; Maertz et al., 2007). A similar association has been reported among academics in Papua New Guinea (Esop & Timms, 2019).

Emotional Intelligence

Emotional intelligence, the ability to appraise, use, understand, and regulate emotions in oneself and others (Wong & Law, 2002), may reduce turnover intention by helping employees manage the frustrations of work without reaching for exit as a solution. Miao et al. (2017) found emotional intelligence to be negatively related to turnover intention across studies, though the effect was smaller for ability-based measures than for self-report measures, and some self-report scales overlap with personality (Joseph & Newman, 2010). Whether emotional intelligence predicts turnover intention once organizational conditions are controlled is therefore an open question.

The Present Study

Studies that compare these predictors within one sample are rare, especially in African public-service settings. Without such comparisons, institutions cannot tell whether to prioritize employment security, support practices, or staff development. The present study estimated the three predictors together, after controlling for demographic characteristics, in a sample that included both academic and non-academic employees of federal, state, and private universities. Four hypotheses were tested:

H1: Job insecurity will positively predict turnover intention.

H2: Perceived organizational support will negatively predict turnover intention.

H3: Emotional intelligence will negatively predict turnover intention.

H4: The three predictors will jointly explain significant variance in turnover intention beyond demographic characteristics.

Because academic qualifications are portable across institutions and national borders, employment category was also expected to be related to turnover intention, with academic staff reporting stronger intentions than non-academic staff. This expectation was examined within the control block rather than stated as a formal hypothesis.

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Method

Design, Setting, and Participants

A cross-sectional survey was conducted in three universities in Oyo State representing the three ownership categories of Nigerian universities: the University of Ibadan (federal), Ladoke Akintola University of Technology, Ogbomoso (state), and Lead City University, Ibadan (private). The accessible population was about 4,500 full-time employees. Eligibility required at least 6 months of continuous service; employees on sabbatical or study leave, part-time or visiting appointees, and contractor-engaged personnel were excluded.

A minimum sample of 354 was calculated with Cochran's (1977) finite-population formula (95% confidence, 5% margin of error) and increased by 15% for non-response. Questionnaires were allocated to institutions in proportion to staff strength and, within institutions, to academic and non-academic strata. Participants in each stratum were selected from staff lists by balloting, with non-responding selections replaced by further random draws. Of 420 questionnaires distributed, 398 were returned (94.8%), and 13 were excluded for excessive missing data or patterned responding, leaving 385 cases.

The sample included 181 employees from the federal university (47.0%), 134 from the state university (34.8%), and 70 from the private university (18.2%). Men made up 59.7% of the sample and women 40.3%. Mean age was 37.15 years (SD = 7.77), and 71.7% of participants were between 31 and 50. Academic staff accounted for 46.5% and non-academic staff for 53.5%. About two thirds held a master's degree or doctorate, and mean tenure was 14.34 years (SD = 7.94).

Measures

Instruments were administered in English, with references to "the organization" replaced by "the university." Scores were summed after reverse-scoring negatively worded items. Means, standard deviations, and alpha coefficients for the present sample are reported in Table 1.

Turnover intention was measured with the six-item Turnover Intention Scale (TIS-6; Bothma & Roodt, 2013), which asks how often the respondent has thought about leaving the current employer. Responses are given on a 5-point frequency scale, and scores range from 6 to 30. In its validation study the TIS-6 distinguished employees who later left from those who stayed (Bothma & Roodt, 2013). Job insecurity was measured with the eight-item Job Insecurity Scale (Hellgren et al., 1999), which combines four quantitative and four qualitative items on a 5-point agreement scale (range 8–40). Perceived organizational support was measured with the eight-item short form of the Survey of Perceived Organizational Support (Eisenberger et al., 1986), rated on a 7-point scale (range 8–56). Emotional intelligence was measured with the 16-item Wong and Law Emotional Intelligence Scale (Wong & Law, 2002), rated on a 7-point scale (range 16–112). For descriptive purposes, organizational commitment was also measured with the 15-item Organizational Commitment Questionnaire (Mowday et al., 1979; range 15–105). Demographic items covered age, sex, highest qualification, employment category, and years of service.

Procedure

The study was approved by the Departmental Research Ethics Committee of the Department of Psychology, Lead City University, and written permission was obtained from each institution. A pilot with 30 employees of a university outside the sample confirmed that completion took 18 to 25 minutes and that the scales were reliable (α = .79–.91). Trained research assistants

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visited selected employees in their offices, obtained written informed consent, left the questionnaire for private completion, and collected it 3 to 5 working days later. The questionnaire did not request names or other identifying information, and participants were told that they could omit items or withdraw at any time without consequence.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed in SPSS Version 26. Isolated missing items were replaced with the respondent's mean on that scale. Hierarchical regression entered age, sex (0 = male, 1 = female), educational qualification (ordinal), employment category (0 = academic, 1 = non-academic), and years of service at Step 1 and the three predictors at Step 2. The change in R^2 at Step 2 tested H4; standardized coefficients tested H1 to H3. Squared semipartial correlations (sr^2) were used to compare the unique contributions of the predictors, and Cohen's f^2 indexed the size of the Step 2 increment (Cohen, 1988). Tests were two-tailed with $\alpha = .05$.

Results

Preliminary Analyses

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics, Internal Consistency, and Correlations Among the Study Variables (N = 385)

Variable	*M*	*SD*	α	1	2	3	4	5
1. Turnover intention	18.34	5.49	.85	—				
2. Job insecurity	23.97	6.79	.83	.48**	—			
3. Perceived organizational support	32.15	10.14	.86	−.35**	−.35**	—		
4. Emotional intelligence	63.43	17.80	.89	−.29**	−.28**	.27**	—	
5. Organizational commitment	59.03	17.82	.90	−.45**	−.42**	.45**	.38**	—

** $p < .01$.

Alpha coefficients ranged from .83 to .90, exceeding the conventional .70 threshold (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994). Skewness values ranged from −0.12 to −0.01. The mean turnover intention score of 18.34 lay slightly above the scale midpoint, indicating that thoughts of leaving were common but not dominant in the sample. Residual diagnostics were satisfactory (all Cook's distances well below 1; Durbin-Watson = 2.03). Variance inflation factors for the three predictors ranged from 1.13 to 1.22. Age and years of service correlated at .96, so their separate coefficients are not interpreted.

As Table 1 shows, turnover intention correlated positively with job insecurity ($r = .48$) and negatively with perceived organizational support ($r = −.35$), emotional intelligence ($r = −.29$), and organizational commitment ($r = −.45$), all ps $< .01$. Job insecurity was related more strongly to turnover intention than to commitment ($r = −.42$), whereas perceived support showed the opposite pattern (.45 with commitment, −.35 with turnover intention).

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Hierarchical Regression

Table 2

Hierarchical Multiple Regression Predicting Turnover Intention (N = 385)

Predictor	*B*	*SE*	95% CI for *B*	β	*t*	sr^2
Step 1						
Age	−0.08	0.12	[−0.32, 0.16]	−.11	−0.66	
Sex	0.11	0.57	[−1.01, 1.23]	.01	0.19	
Educational qualification	−0.17	0.32	[−0.80, 0.46]	−.03	−0.55	
Employment category	−1.32	0.59	[−2.48, −0.16]	−.12	−2.24*	
Years of service	0.07	0.12	[−0.17, 0.31]	.10	0.57	
Step 2						
Age	0.01	0.10	[−0.19, 0.21]	.02	0.11	
Sex	0.55	0.49	[−0.41, 1.51]	.05	1.13	
Educational qualification	−0.39	0.27	[−0.92, 0.14]	−.07	−1.45	
Employment category	−1.13	0.50	[−2.11, −0.15]	−.10	−2.26*	
Years of service	−0.01	0.10	[−0.21, 0.19]	−.02	−0.13	
Job insecurity	0.31	0.04	[0.23, 0.38]	.38	8.01***	.119
Perceived organizational support	−0.10	0.03	[−0.15, −0.05]	−.19	−3.98***	.029
Emotional intelligence	−0.04	0.01	[−0.07, −0.01]	−.13	−2.90**	.016

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Results are presented in Table 2. The demographic block did not explain significant variance in turnover intention, $R^2 = .015$, $F(5, 379) = 1.13$, $p = .344$. Within it, however, employment category was a significant individual predictor, $\beta = -.12$, $t(379) = -2.24$, $p < .05$: non-academic staff reported weaker intentions to leave than academic staff.

Adding the three predictors at Step 2 increased explained variance to 30.0%, $\Delta R^2 = .285$, $\Delta F(3, 376) = 51.03$, $p < .001$, $f^2 = 0.41$, a large effect. The full model was significant, $F(8, 376) = 20.12$, $p < .001$, adjusted $R^2 = .285$, supporting H4.

Job insecurity was the strongest predictor, $\beta = .38$, $t(376) = 8.01$, $p < .001$, $sr^2 = .119$, supporting H1. Perceived organizational support predicted lower turnover intention, $\beta = -.19$, $t(376) = -3.98$, $p < .001$, $sr^2 = .029$, supporting H2. Emotional intelligence also predicted lower turnover intention, $\beta = -.13$, $t(376) = -2.90$, $p = .004$, $sr^2 = .016$, supporting H3. Employment category remained significant, $\beta = -.10$, $t(376) = -2.26$, $p < .05$.

The squared semipartial correlations show how uneven these contributions were. Job insecurity uniquely accounted for about 12% of the variance in turnover intention, more than twice the combined unique contribution of perceived support and emotional intelligence (about 4.5%). Its standardized coefficient was also twice that of perceived support.

Discussion

Turnover intention among these university employees was explained mainly by job insecurity. Perceived organizational support and emotional intelligence also contributed, but their

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effects were smaller, and demographic characteristics, apart from a modest difference between academic and non-academic staff, were unrelated to the intention to leave.

The Primacy of Job Insecurity

That insecurity outweighed support matters because much retention advice for universities concentrates on welfare, recognition, and working relationships, which these data suggest is a secondary concern in this sector. Employees appear to begin thinking about leaving when they doubt that the job, or the things that make it worth having, will last. Conservation of resources theory predicts this pattern: when a central resource is threatened, people move to protect what remains, and departure from the source of threat is an obvious protective strategy (Hobfoll, 1989; Hobfoll et al., 2018). The effect size is also consistent with meta-analytic evidence that insecurity is a strong correlate of withdrawal intentions (Jiang & Lavaysse, 2018; Sverke et al., 2002).

The Nigerian setting may sharpen the effect. Repeated strikes, unpaid salaries, and suspended allowances in public universities, and contract renewal tied to enrolment in private universities, give employees concrete reasons to doubt their future (Ogunode & Lawan, 2020). In the language of the unfolding model, each such event is a potential shock that prompts employees to reconsider their attachment (Lee & Mitchell, 1994). The failure to deliver predictable pay and progression probably feels to many employees like the kind of contract breach that Kanu et al. (2022) linked to turnover intention among Nigerian lecturers.

Support and Emotional Intelligence

Perceived organizational support reduced turnover intention, as organizational support theory predicts (Kurtessis et al., 2017; Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002), but its correlation with commitment was larger than its correlation with turnover intention. A plausible reading is that support works mainly on the employee's emotional bond with the institution, and only indirectly on the decision to leave (Allen et al., 2003; Maertz et al., 2007). An employee may value a caring institution and still conclude that its future, or their own future within it, is too uncertain.

Emotional intelligence made the smallest contribution. Emotionally competent employees appear somewhat less prone to turn frustration into thoughts of leaving, consistent with Miao et al. (2017), but the modest effect carries a warning. Emotional regulation may help employees endure difficult conditions, but it does not stop them from judging those conditions unacceptable. Institutions should not expect emotional intelligence training to retain staff whose jobs feel insecure.

Employment Category

Academic staff reported slightly stronger intentions to leave than non-academic staff, and the difference persisted after the psychological predictors were controlled. Academic qualifications travel across institutions and borders, whereas administrative and technical careers are more often tied to one institution, so the result fits the classic role of perceived ease of movement (March & Simon, 1958). Because perceived employability was not measured, the mechanism remains an inference, and it deserves direct testing.

Practical Implications

The results suggest that retention in Nigerian universities depends first on reducing employment uncertainty. For public institutions this involves predictable salary payment, timely promotion, and transparent handling of allowances, which in turn require funding stability from government. For private institutions it involves clear and fair criteria for contract renewal and

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early communication about renewal decisions. Support practices remain worthwhile, but they are unlikely to offset a pervasive sense that the job is at risk, and academic staff, with their wider alternatives, may need particular attention.

Limitations and Future Research

The cross-sectional design does not establish causal order; employees who have already decided to leave may appraise their security more pessimistically. All measures were self-reports collected at one time, so common method variance may have inflated the associations (Podsakoff et al., 2003). The sample was drawn from three institutions in one state, contract staff were excluded, and actual turnover was not measured, although the TIS-6 has shown predictive validity for leaving (Bothma & Roodt, 2013). The Job Insecurity Scale was analyzed as a total score, so the relative importance of quantitative and qualitative insecurity cannot be determined. Longitudinal designs that record actual departures, separate analysis of the two insecurity dimensions, direct measures of perceived employability, and tests of whether support buffers the effect of insecurity would all strengthen these conclusions.

Conclusion

In three Nigerian universities, the intention to leave was driven mainly by job insecurity, with support and emotional intelligence offering smaller protection. Experienced staff are unlikely to stay unless they can see a secure future in their present posts.

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