

## REVISITING TURNOVER THEORIES: A LITERATURE REVIEW ON THE CENTRAL ROLE OF JOB SATISFACTION

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### Abstract

This literature review revisits the major theories of turnover by synthesizing classical and contemporary perspectives to clarify the central role of job satisfaction in shaping turnover intention. Although many prior studies have relied on direct-effect models to explain how work-related factors influence turnover, such approaches offer limited insight into the psychological processes underlying employees' decisions to leave an organization. Drawing on Mobley's Turnover Process Theory and Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory, this review highlights job satisfaction as the most consistent affective mechanism that links work experiences to the intention to leave. Contemporary constructs, such as competency development, compensation and benefit, meaningful work, and work-life balance are integrated to reflect the dynamic nature of modern work environments. The proposed conceptual model positions job satisfaction as the key mediator bridging intrinsic and extrinsic factors with turnover intention. This synthesis offers a sharper theoretical understanding of turnover dynamics and provides a foundation for future empirical research to validate the proposed model across diverse organizational contexts.

**Keywords:** turnover theories; job satisfaction; literature review; affective mechanisms; conceptual model

### INTRODUCTION

The phenomenon of turnover intention continues to receive significant attention in organizational behavior research, particularly due to its global increase and its impact on performance and workforce stability. PwC (2024) reported a rise in turnover rates from 19% in 2022 to 28% in 2024, reflecting growing organizational pressure to retain talent and maintain operational efficiency. This condition reinforces the urgency of understanding the theoretical mechanisms underlying turnover intention, especially the psychological factors that shape an individual's decision to leave an organization.

The literature on turnover has evolved through diverse theoretical approaches, ranging from direct-effect models that position antecedents as primary predictors of turnover intention, to models that emphasize psychological and affective processes in explaining withdrawal behavior. Early work by Mobley (1977) through the Turnover Process Theory introduced the concept of a staged psychological evaluation that begins with job dissatisfaction and progresses toward the formation of turnover intention. This perspective was later enriched by other frameworks, including Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory, Job Characteristics Theory, and contemporary models addressing work-life balance and meaningful work.

Although previous research has contributed valuable insights into turnover, two major models often produce divergent interpretations, the direct-effect model and the mediated model, particularly those involving job satisfaction. Inconsistencies in empirical findings and limitations in

capturing affective processes highlight the need to re-examine how these two models fit within a more contemporary theoretical landscape.

Therefore, this study is structured as a literature review aimed at analyzing the evolution of turnover theories, comparing the two dominant approaches in explaining turnover intention, and integrating contemporary psychological perspectives to develop a more comprehensive conceptual model. This review is expected to expand the theoretical understanding of turnover mechanisms and provide direction for future research to empirically test these models across more diverse organizational contexts.

Furthermore, the increasingly dynamic nature of modern work necessitates updated perspectives on how contemporary work-related factors interact with employees' psychological experiences. Recent literature indicates that emerging constructs such as meaningful work, job flexibility, and digital work demands influence employees' emotional responses to their jobs. However, many classical turnover theories have not fully incorporated these psychosocial variables into their analytical frameworks. This gap underscores the need for a more holistic synthesis capable of capturing the complexity of turnover dynamics in today's work environment.

In addition, previous studies often discuss work-related factors and psychological processes separately, without providing an integrative explanation of how these two dimensions influence one another. Such a fragmented approach can obscure the internal mechanisms that drive employees to contemplate leaving. By conducting a comprehensive literature review, this study seeks to bridge this gap by highlighting the central role of job satisfaction as the affective construct that links working conditions to turnover intention. Thus, this review not only reorganizes existing theories but also contributes to the development of a conceptual model that is more adaptive to the realities of the modern workforce.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This study employs a desk research or literature-based analysis approach aimed at synthesizing the development of theories and previous research findings related to turnover intention. This approach aligns with the definition of desk research as a process of collecting and analyzing secondary data from journals, books, and scholarly publications (Snyder, 2019). The literature search was conducted systematically across journal articles, academic books, and relevant scientific publications spanning 1959–2025, encompassing both classical theories and contemporary perspectives in organizational behavior.

The selection process followed the principles of systematic searching as outlined by Webster

and Watson (2002) and Okoli and Schabram (2010), by identifying works that directly discuss turnover mechanisms, job satisfaction constructs, and psychosocial antecedents associated with turnover intention. Literature searches were conducted through major academic databases such as Google Scholar, ScienceDirect, Emerald, and ProQuest using keywords including *turnover intention*, *turnover theory*, *job satisfaction*, *competency development*, *compensation and benefit*, *meaningful work*, *work-life balance*, and *antecedents of turnover*. Inclusion criteria consisted of theoretical and empirical works that provide substantial contributions to understanding turnover mechanisms, while publications lacking theoretical relevance were excluded (Torraco, 2005).

The analysis was conducted using a narrative synthesis approach, an integrative method that combines findings and theoretical frameworks into a coherent interpretive pattern (Popay et al., 2006). This approach enables the researcher to compare turnover models, identify theoretical gaps, and formulate a more comprehensive conceptual model based on the integration of classical theories and modern psychosocial variables. Thus, this method provides a strong theoretical foundation for evaluating the contributions of various turnover models and for developing theoretical extensions that are relevant to modern workforce dynamics.

## THEORETICAL REVIEW

### Turnover Theories

Turnover is one of the classic topics in organizational behavior research and has evolved through various theoretical approaches over more than five decades. A key foundation for understanding turnover is the Turnover Process Theory developed by Mobley (1977). This theory emphasizes that turnover is not an abrupt or impulsive decision, but rather a gradual psychological process beginning with job dissatisfaction, followed by thoughts of quitting, evaluation of job alternatives, consideration of consequences, and ultimately the formation of turnover intention (Hom et al., 2017). Accordingly, the theory positions affective and cognitive processes at the core of explaining withdrawal behavior.

In addition to process-based approaches, the literature also identifies direct-effect models, which view turnover intention as a linear response to specific work conditions. In these models (e.g., Hui et al., 2023; Mun et al., 2024), factors such as compensation, work-life balance, or workload are assumed to exert a direct influence on turnover intention without the involvement of psychological variables as mediating mechanisms. Although widely used in empirical research due to their simplicity and ease of testing, these models are limited by their inability to account for the internal psychological dynamics that occur during decision-making (Hui et al., 2023).

Beyond these two dominant approaches, turnover theories have also expanded through perspectives such as the Unfolding Model of Turnover (Lee & Mitchell, 1994), which highlights the role of “shocks” that can accelerate withdrawal decisions, and job embeddedness theory, which focuses on individuals’ attachment to their organizations as a retention factor. Although these models contribute to a broader understanding of turnover, they do not fully capture the role of affective factors such as job satisfaction in shaping turnover processes.

Overall, the evolution of turnover theories demonstrates two primary explanatory streams: approaches that emphasize the direct effects of work conditions and approaches that highlight psychological mechanisms as mediating links. These distinctions form the conceptual basis for this literature review, which re-evaluates how turnover intention should be understood within the context of the modern workforce.

### **Job Satisfaction as an Affective Mechanism**

Job satisfaction is one of the most important psychological constructs in organizational behavior literature, as it serves as an evaluative indicator of an individual’s work experiences. The literature suggests that job satisfaction is shaped by a combination of intrinsic and extrinsic factors, as explained in Herzberg’s Two-Factor Theory (1959), which distinguishes between motivators (e.g., competency development and meaningful work) and hygiene factors (e.g., compensation and work-life balance). This distinction provides a theoretical foundation for understanding how positive work experiences enhance satisfaction and generate stable affective responses.

Contemporary literature reinforces the role of job satisfaction as an affective mechanism mediating the relationship between work conditions and turnover intention (Hom et al., 2017; Cahyadi et al., 2024). Within the Turnover Process Theory, job satisfaction functions as the initial psychological element that triggers evaluations of alternative employment options (Mobley, 1977). Modern studies also show that factors such as work-life balance and meaningful work tend to influence turnover intention indirectly through job satisfaction (Alves et al., 2024; Vizano et al., 2021).

### **Competency Development**

Competency development refers to the process of enhancing individuals’ knowledge, skills, and abilities to meet job demands while advancing their careers (De Vos et al., 2011). Competency development is viewed as an organizational investment in human capital that strengthens employees’ confidence, sense of capability, and perceptions of career progress. Within the context of organizational behavior, the development of competencies contributes to the formation of job satisfaction, as employees perceive greater opportunities for growth and mobility (Cheng, 2025).

Conversely, limited opportunities for competency development often lead to feelings of stagnation and uncertainty, particularly among employees in the early stages of their careers. Research shows that restricted access to training, coaching, or career development opportunities is associated with increased turnover, as employees tend to seek organizations that provide better career prospects (Cahyadi et al., 2024). Thus, competency development emerges as an important antecedent that shapes affective experiences and psychological evaluations, which in turn influence turnover intention.

### **Compensation and Benefit**

Compensation and benefit are core components of an organization's reward system and play a significant role in shaping employees' perceptions of fairness in the workplace. Grounded in equity theory and social exchange theory, compensation that is perceived as fair enhances employees' sense of appreciation and strengthens the psychological relationship between employees and the organization (Dessler, 2019). An adequate compensation system also serves as a form of recognition for employee contributions and has a direct influence on their evaluations of their job and the organization.

Research indicates that perceptions of unfair or insufficient compensation increase employees' likelihood of considering alternative employment. Studies by Idris et al. (2020), Vizano et al. (2021), and Abugu and Othman (2024) show that competitive compensation and relevant benefits are positively associated with job satisfaction and contribute to reducing turnover intention. Thus, compensation is not merely an extrinsic factor, it also shapes affective responses that influence employees' willingness to stay.

### **Meaningful Work**

Meaningful work is defined as the extent to which individuals perceive their work as valuable, significant, and contributing to personal or social purposes (Steger et al., 2012). The literature indicates that meaningful work enhances a sense of identity, fosters intrinsic motivation, and creates positive emotional connections to one's job. In this context, meaningful work has become an increasingly important psychological construct in the modern workplace.

Research demonstrates that meaningful work has a substantial impact on job satisfaction and organizational commitment. Allan et al. (2016) emphasize that when employees perceive their work as meaningful, they are more satisfied and less likely to seek alternative employment. Rabiul et al. (2023) also found that a lack of meaningful work may lead to emotional exhaustion and increase turnover intention, positioning meaningful work as a strong psychological antecedent in contemporary turnover models.

## Work-Life Balance

Work-life balance (WLB) refers to an individual's ability to manage the demands of work and personal life in a way that maintains equilibrium between the two, preventing one domain from negatively affecting the other (Greenhaus & Powell, 2006). A healthy level of WLB provides a sense of control and emotional stability, which in turn contributes to psychological well-being and job satisfaction. The literature indicates that WLB is a crucial factor for modern employees who face flexible work arrangements and increasing digitalization of work.

Empirical studies further reinforce the role of WLB in reducing turnover intention. Aruldoss et al. (2021) found that WLB is positively associated with job satisfaction, while poor balance between personal and professional roles increases stress and the likelihood of seeking alternative employment. Additionally, the dynamics of the digital work era create new pressures such as work spillover, making WLB an even more critical element in explaining turnover (Mukherjee, 2024; Mahendra & Kurniawati, 2024). Thus, WLB is not merely an external condition but also a source of affective evaluation that shapes employees' decisions to stay with or leave an organization.

## SYNTHESIS

The literature on turnover intention demonstrates two major approaches to explaining the relationship between work conditions and employees' decisions to leave, namely direct-effect models and mediated models grounded in psychological mechanisms. Direct-effect models position variables such as compensation or work-life balance as predictors that directly influence turnover intention (Hui et al., 2023; Mun et al., 2024). Although widely used in empirical research due to their simplicity, these models have been criticized for their limited ability to explain the internal psychological processes underlying withdrawal behavior (Hom et al., 2017).

In contrast, mediated approaches are rooted in Mobley's (1977) Turnover Process Theory, which argues that turnover results from a sequence of cognitive and affective evaluations beginning with job dissatisfaction. This perspective is reinforced by Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory (1959), which identifies motivators and hygiene factors as key elements in the formation of job satisfaction. Consistent with this framework, modern studies indicate that antecedents such as meaningful work (Steger et al., 2012; Allan et al., 2016), work-life balance (Aruldoss et al., 2021), compensation (Vizano et al., 2021), and competency development (Cahyadi et al., 2024) tend to influence turnover intention indirectly through job satisfaction. Thus, mediated models provide a more nuanced understanding of the complex psychological dynamics that shape turnover decisions.

Synthesis of the literature suggests that mediated models offer stronger theoretical

consistency than direct-effect models because they explain how work factors shape employees' emotional and evaluative responses. Moreover, this approach aligns more closely with the characteristics of the modern workforce, which increasingly values intrinsic aspects such as meaningful work and role balance (Allan et al., 2016; Greenhaus & Powell, 2006). Nonetheless, classical theories such as those by Mobley (1977) and Herzberg (1959) have not fully incorporated contemporary psychosocial variables like meaningful work and work-life balance, indicating a need for theoretical expansion through the integration of modern perspectives.

Based on this analysis, the present review proposes an integrative conceptual model that positions job satisfaction as the central affective mechanism linking both classical and contemporary antecedents to turnover intention. The model combines the strengths of direct-effect models, which identify the influence of work factors, with the advantages of mediated models, which emphasize the psychological processes that occur prior to withdrawal decisions. Positioning job satisfaction as the primary mediator aligns with theoretical and empirical evidence indicating that affective experiences are core components in the formation of turnover intention (Hom et al., 2017; Allan et al., 2016; Rabiul et al., 2023).

This conceptual model also provides a theoretical foundation for future research to examine the simultaneous influence of intrinsic and extrinsic antecedents on turnover intention. By integrating variables such as competency development, compensation and benefit, meaningful work, and work-life balance within a unified mediational framework, the model offers a more comprehensive understanding of how work conditions are psychologically interpreted by employees.

## **PROPOSED CONCEPTUAL MODEL**

Based on the synthesis of the literature, the proposed conceptual model positions job satisfaction as the central affective mechanism linking various work-related antecedents to turnover intention. The literature indicates that competency development, compensation and benefit, meaningful work, and work-life balance not only shape employees' work conditions but also influence their psychological evaluations, which are reflected in their level of job satisfaction. Accordingly, this model integrates both classical and contemporary perspectives to demonstrate that turnover intention is more accurately understood through an affective mediational process rather than through direct relationships alone.

This model is proposed as a theoretical framework that clarifies the central role of job satisfaction in modern turnover dynamics and provides a conceptual foundation for future research

to examine the simultaneous effects of intrinsic and extrinsic factors in shaping withdrawal behavior.

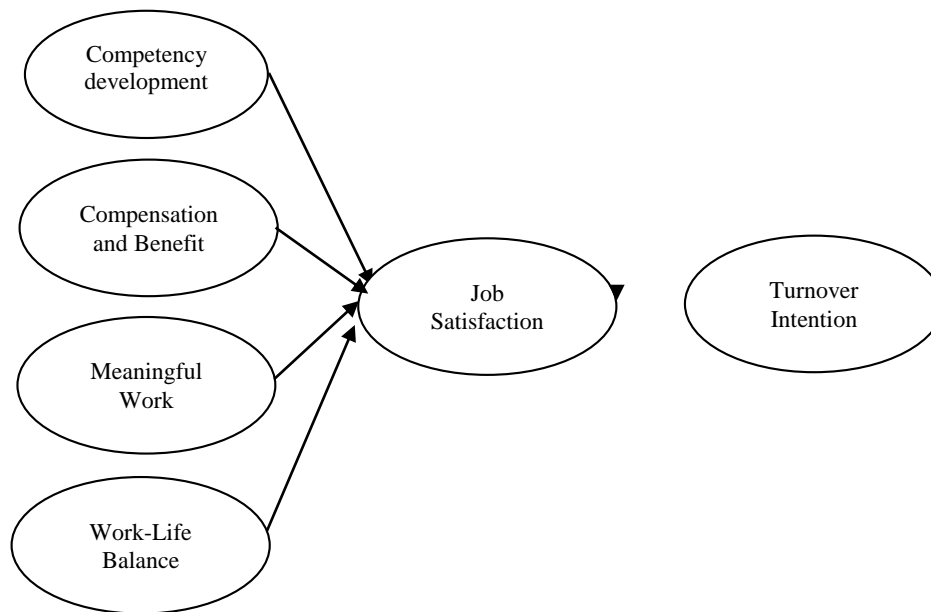


Figure 1 – Proposed Conceptual Model Prepared by Author

## CONCLUSION

This literature review demonstrates that the dynamics of turnover intention cannot be understood solely through direct relationships between work conditions and withdrawal decisions. The synthesis of classical and contemporary theories highlights that job satisfaction functions as the most consistent affective mechanism explaining how intrinsic and extrinsic factors are psychologically processed before turnover intention emerges. The integration of the Turnover Process Theory, the Two-Factor Theory, and modern findings on meaningful work, competency development, compensation, and work-life balance indicates that mediated models offer a more comprehensive explanation than direct-effect approaches.

As a theoretical contribution, this study proposes an integrative conceptual model that positions job satisfaction at the core of modern turnover frameworks. The model not only combines classical and psychosocial perspectives but also provides a more relevant analytical foundation for understanding the contemporary workforce, in which meaningful work, role balance, and development opportunities have become increasingly important elements.

Despite offering a broad theoretical mapping, this review is limited by its literature-based nature, which does not allow for empirical testing of the relationships among variables. Therefore, future studies may examine the proposed conceptual model using quantitative or mixed-method approaches and consider potential moderating factors such as organizational commitment or job

embeddedness to enrich the understanding of turnover behavior across diverse work contexts.

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