

IT Employees' Turnover and Deviance: The Impacts of Job Insecurity and Moral Disengagement

Research-in-Progress

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Abstract

IT professionals may feel that rapid development in IT pose a threat to their jobs or they are threatened by co-workers with newer technology skills. Thus, it is important to understand the impact of job insecurity on IT professionals. This study aims to examine why and when IT employees might respond to job insecurity by engaging in deviance and developing turnover intentions. Drawing on transactional model of stress and coping and moral disengagement theory, we propose that job insecurity increases IT employees' turnover intentions by increasing their negative emotions and job strain. In addition, job insecurity increases deviance by increasing negative emotion and encouraging IT employees to morally disengage. We further propose that the pace of IT change leads to job insecurity, and empathy and moral identity decreases moral disengagement. This study will empirically test the model with data collected from 300 IT/IS professionals of Taiwan's top 1000 companies.

Keywords: Deviance, IT professionals, job insecurity, moral disengagement, transactional model of stress and coping, turnover intention

Introduction

The continued innovation in IT represents radical changes to work practices, which may cause various job demands on IT professionals. For example, IT professionals may need to learn and leverage new skill sets. Without constantly updating their IT knowledge or skills, IT professionals may feel that rapid development in IT pose a threat to their jobs or they are threatened by co-workers with newer technology skills. In other words, IT professionals may have a strong feeling of job insecurity. Job insecurity has drawn increased research attention. This attention seems to be warranted. Studies have found that that job insecurity leads to low organizational commitment (Davy et al., 1991) and high intentions to quit (Probst, 2005). Retaining valuable IT professionals is critical to the attainment of organizational strategic goals. Thus, it is important to understand the impact of job insecurity on IT professionals.

The existing literature has drawn heavily on transactional model of stress and coping (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984) in identifying and explaining employee responses to job insecurity (e.g., Jordan et al., 2002). This perspective holds that when faced with a stressor (e.g., job insecurity), an individual appraises the potential threat, appraises his or her coping resources and options, and then choose coping strategies to deal with the stressor. Although these are valuable insights, existing transactional model of stress and coping focuses on enhancing individuals' well-being, and thus may actually understate the negative organizational consequences of job insecurity. There may be instances when individuals respond to the presence of job insecurity not only by leaving the organizations but also by engaging in ordeveloping intentions to engage in behaviors that are directly harmful or costly to the organization and/or its members (Huang et al., 2017). Huang et al. (2017) identified two harmful behaviors (deviant behaviors), *interpersonal workplace deviance*, or deviant behaviors directed toward individuals (e.g., aggression, gossiping), and *organizational workplace deviance*, or deviant behaviors directed toward the organization (e.g., taking company property, misusing an expense account). Both deviance and turnover have a dramatic negative impact on organizational performance. Thus, better understanding how the increasingly common experience of job insecurity might promote these outcomes is of paramount importance.

Huang et al. (2017) argued that employees' deviant behavior cannot be solely explained in terms of reduced employee motivation. It is necessary to explore the social and psychological pathways through which job insecurity influences employees' deviant behavior. Deviance is unethical behavior, therefore Huang et al. (2017) used moral disengagement theory explain why employees will engage in deviance. Moral disengagement is a set of cognitive mechanisms that decouple one's internal moral standards from one's actions, facilitating engaging in unethical behavior without feeling distress. Huang et al. (2017) found that job insecurity affects deviance by increasing employees' moral disengagement—that is, by making it more likely they will develop rationalizations that reduce the cognitive dissonance their deviant actions would otherwise produce. Their study focuses primarily on the outcomes of moral disengagement, but ignores factors to reduce moral disengagement. Despite its potential importance for explaining employees' unethical behaviors, our understanding of moral disengagement remains at an early stage. Most importantly, we know little about the antecedents of moral disengagement. Therefore, additional investigation of the antecedents of moral disengagement using a conceptual framework that incorporates additional theoretical perspectives is clearly necessary.

In this research, we more fully address the question of why and in what situations job insecurity increases employee deviance and turnover intention by integrating transactional model of stress and coping (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984) and moral disengagement theory (Bandura, 1986, 1991). Specifically, we propose that job insecurity encourages employees to cognitively reframe deviance and turnover as response to stressor. This process of strain and moral disengagement increases the likelihood that they will engage in or intend to engage in turnover and deviance. Building on this logic, we identify one factor that are likely to mediate the effect of job insecurity on job strain and moral disengagement, thereby affecting turnover intention and deviance. Specifically, we propose that negative emotion creates pressure for corrective action, thereby provide motivation for unethical behaviors as a behavioral coping strategy. In addition, prior studies have found that individuals with high empathy and moral identity are less likely to morally disengage from unethical behaviors (e.g., Detert et al., 2008). Therefore, we model empathy and moral identity as antecedents of moral disengagement in the research model.

The research questions of interest to this study are: (1) Does job insecurity lead to IT employees' turnover intention and deviance through negative emotion, job strain, and moral disengagement, and (2)

Does empathy and moral identity reduce moral disengagement?

Literature Review

Transactional Model of Stress and Coping

The Transactional Model of Stress and Coping (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984) is a framework for evaluating the processes of coping with stressful events. Within the model, two critical processes are postulated to mediate the person-environment relationship: cognitive appraisal and coping. Cognitive appraisal is "a process through which the person evaluates whether a particular encounter with the environment is relevant to his or her well-being, and if so, in what ways" (Folkman et al., 1986, p. 992). The cognitive appraisal of a stressor include two component processes: primary and secondary appraisals (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984). Primary appraisal is the person's evaluation of whether he or she has anything at stake in a certain situation or encounter (Folkman et al., 1986). In primary appraisals, a situation or event is perceived as being either irrelevant, benign-positive, or stressful. Stressful situations or stressors can be further appraised as challenge, threat, and harm/loss (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984). Challenge refers to the potential for growth, mastery, or some form of gain (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984). Threat refers to possible future damage (harm/loss) that an event may cause. Harm/loss refers to an injury or damage that has already taken place.

In secondary appraisal, the person evaluates what if anything can be done to overcome or prevent harm or to improve the prospects for benefit (Folkman et al., 1986). Secondary appraisal involves people's evaluation of their options for coping and available resources (Lazarus, 1991), as well as controllability of the stressor or situation. It is under conditions appraised as stressful that secondary appraisals of coping resources and options become especially relevant. In other words, events or situations appraised as positive will result in no perceived stress; in such cases, use of a coping strategy is unnecessary. Lazarus (1999) maintained that the different forms of appraisal are interdependent parts of the cognitive appraisal process.

Coping Strategies

Coping is defined as the person's "constantly changing cognitive and behavioral efforts to manage specific external and/or internal demands that are appraised as taxing or exceeding the person's resources" (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984, p.141). Coping involves psychological resources and coping strategies that help to eliminate, modify, or manage a stressful event or crisis situation. Although many classifications of coping strategies exist in the literature, the most widely used distinction is the one proposed by Lazarus and Folkman (1984). They classified ways or strategies of coping by function as either problem-focused or emotion-focused. Problem-focused coping refers to efforts to alter the troubled person-environment relation causing the distress, while emotion-focused coping refers to efforts to regulate stressful emotions (Folkman et al., 1986). Problem-focused coping is generally viewed as adaptive, and emotion-focused coping is viewed as maladaptive.

General Strain Theory

General strain theory (GST) is usually tested by examining the effect of strain on crime. GST (Agnew, 1985, 1992) posits that strain leads to negative emotions that people seek to release, sometimes, through deviant behaviors (e.g., criminal acts). GST posits that individuals encounter three potential forms of strain: failure to achieve positively valued goals, presentation of a noxious stimulus, and removal of a positively valued stimulus. These strains are likely to elicit negative emotional responses (e.g., anger, fear, depression, rage), which then triggers potential coping mechanisms as individuals seek to deal with the strainful event(s) and ensuing emotional feeling. Individuals may resort to deviant or delinquent behavior as a behavioral coping strategy because emotional responses creates pressure for corrective action. The more distressed an individual gets, the more likely it is for the individual to engage in crime. Lazarus and Folkman (1984) identified two main coping strategies: problem-focused and emotion-focused. They ignore the possibility that individuals may resort to deviant or delinquent behavior as a coping strategy. General strain theory can complement the deficiency of transactional model of stress and coping theory in coping strategies.

Moral disengagement Theory

Bandura (1986) introduced the theory of moral disengagement as an extension of his more general social cognitive theory. Bandura (1999) argued that moral self-regulation can be activated and deactivated selectively, and he proposed moral disengagement as the key deactivation process. Through moral disengagement, individuals are freed from the self-sanctions and the accompanying guilt that would ensue when behavior violates internal standards, and they are therefore more likely to make unethical decisions. In other words, the self-regulatory process can fail when moral disengagement mechanisms disable the cognitive links between transgressive behavior and the self-sanctioning that should prevent it (Bandura 1986). Moral disengagement is a set of social-cognitive mechanisms that allow individuals to justify their reprehensible and damaging for the social safety actions in order to preserve the self-image (Bandura, 1986).

Bandura proposed that moral disengagement occurs through a set of eight interrelated cognitive mechanisms that facilitate unethical behavior. The eight mechanisms were classified into three main categories. The first category, reconstruing the conduct, consists of three mechanisms: moral justification, euphemistic labeling, and advantageous comparison. Reconstruing the conduct involve cognitive misconstrual of reprehensible behavior in a way that increases its moral acceptability (Bandura, 1986). The second category, obscuring or distorting consequences, consists of three moral disengagement mechanisms: displacement of responsibility, diffusion of responsibility, and distortion of consequences. The third category, devaluing the target, consists of two moral disengagement mechanisms: dehumanization and attribution of blame.

D'Arcy et al. (2014) integrated moral disengagement theory with transactional model of stress and coping theory to explore an underlying relationship between employee stress caused by burdensome, complex, and ambiguous information security requirements (termed “security-related stress” or SRS) and deliberate information security policy (ISP) violations. In their research, moral disengagement is viewed as an emotion-focused strategy and violation intention as the coping outcome. In this study, we viewed deviance as a behavioral coping and moral disengagement as a social-cognitive mechanism that allow individuals to justify the behavioral coping response (e.g., deviance) to the stressor (e.g., job insecurity).

Research Model and Hypotheses

Drawing upon transactional model of stress and coping, general strain theory, and moral disengagement theory, we propose a model to study and explain the influence of job insecurity on IS employees' turnover intention and deviance. Deviance refers to behaviors directed at harming the organization and its employees. Huang et al. (2017) identified two different types of deviant behavior: interpersonal workplace deviance and organizational workplace deviance. In this study, we focus on organizational workplace deviance. In this study, turnover intention refers to an IS employee's conscious and deliberate willingness to leave the organization. As shown in Figure 1, our model predicts that there are two paths linking job insecurity, turnover intention, and deviance. The first path theorizes that job insecurity leads to negative emotion, which in turns leads to strain and subsequently turnover intention. The first path theorizes that job insecurity leads to negative emotion, which in turns leads to moral disengagement and subsequently deviance. In addition, the research model theorizes that empathy and moral identity reduce moral disengagement. The remainder of this section will define the constructs and develop the hypotheses presented in the model.

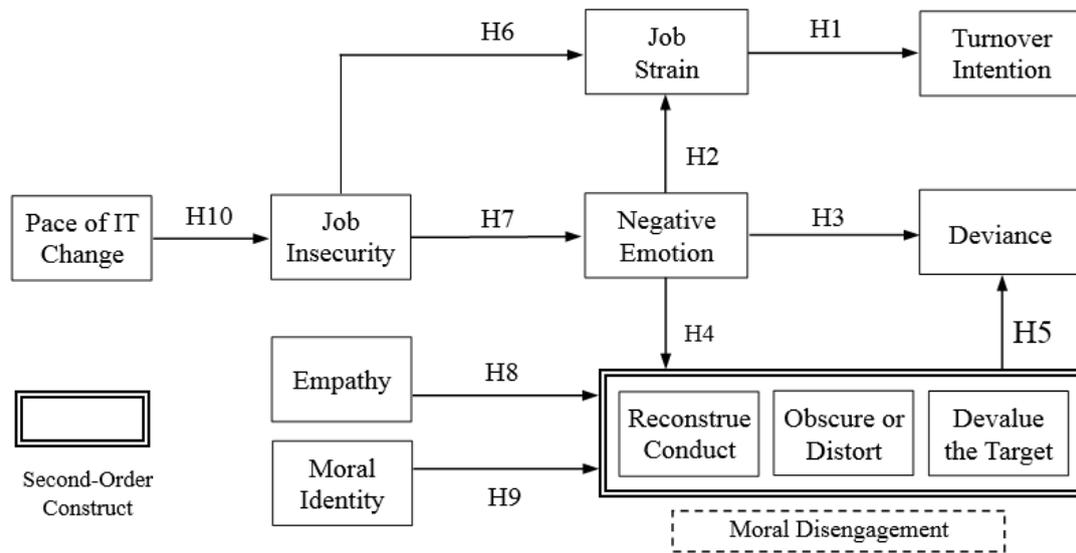


Figure 1. Research Model

Job strain refers to the process of technostress stressors, or stimuli in the workplace, leading to psychological responses or reactions. Strains associated with an employee’s present working conditions are a key predictor of turnover intention. Strain is also purported to reflect a negative evaluation of the employee-organization exchange relationship (Cropanzano et al., 1997). Thus, as strain increases, employees’ morale and sense of obligation toward their organization decline. Employees’ loyalty and commitment to their organization can be viewed as a sense obligation toward the organization. Accordingly, IT professionals experiencing strain are likely to have low sense of obligation toward their organization, and thus expected to report a higher propensity to leave the job.

H1: Job strain is positively related to turnover intention.

Strain is an unpleasant psychological state related to negative emotions such as fear, anxiety, disturbance, anger, sadness and grief. Positive emotions are important facilitators of adaptive coping and adjustment to acute and chronic stress (Folkman and Moskowitz, 2000). It suggests that negative emotions invokes maladaptive coping, which in turns lead to strain. According to Fredrickson (2001), positive emotions broaden people’s momentary thought-action repertoires and build their enduring personal resources (e.g., self-efficacy and optimism), which in turn may reduce or prevent their emotional exhaustion. Negative emotions can not help individuals build psychological resources that are essential in coping effectively with stressors, which in turn may increase their strain. Ayyagari et al. (2011) provided a support for the notion that negative emotion has a positive effect on job strain.

H2: Negative emotion is positively related to job strain.

According to general strain theory (Agnew, 1992), stressors generate negative emotions that provide motivation for deviant behaviors as a coping strategy because such emotional forces create pressure for corrective action. Deviance is one way to cope with strain and negative emotions. Individuals may engage in deviant behaviors to escape from or reduce their strain or alleviate negative emotions. Agnew (1992) suggest that the individual unable to reduce the amount of stressors and negative emotions with legal coping strategies, can opt for inner-directed (e.g. substance use) or other-directed (e.g. interpersonal aggression, property crime) deviant behaviors.

H3: Negative emotion is positively related to deviance.

Fida et al. (2014) argued that negative emotions can activate moral disengagement as a secondary cognitive process through which individual moral standards are momentarily obscured, giving access to deviant behaviors as a plausible behavioral strategy to cope with negative emotions derived from negatively perceived situations. They theorized that moral disengagement plays a mediating role in translating negative emotional responses to stressors into deviant behaviors.

H4: Negative emotion is positively related to moral disengagement.

According to moral disengagement theory, when an individual's moral beliefs and values justify unethical behavior, there is less dissonance or inhibition from engaging in unethical actions (e.g., organizational workplace deviance), as such acts are deemed acceptable. Employees who experience negative health consequences as a result of their job insecurity may view deviant behaviors as a justifiable form of retribution for the suffering they have already experienced (Bandura, 1999). Rather than viewing deviant behavior as immoral, job-insecure individuals are likely to view deviance as a justifiable means of "getting back at" the organization and those in it for contributing to their job insecurity (Huang et al., 2017).

H5: Moral disengagement is positively related to deviance.

Job insecurity is the perceived threat of job loss and the worries related to that threat. Job insecurity is a stressor. All stressors are subject to the same psychological process (i.e., appraisal and coping), which requires emotional and cognitive effort (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984) and thus results in forms of strain such as fatigue, and exhaustion (Jex, 1998). Conservation of resources theory states that an individual is likely to experience strains when there is a perceived threat of resource loss (e.g., job loss), an actual loss of valued resources, or when invested resources do not result in anticipated returns (Hobfoll, 2001). Job insecurity is a threatening or hindering stressor, because employees tend to view it as an obstacle to personal growth and task accomplishment, triggers job strain (Podsakoff, et al., 2007).

H6: Job insecurity is positively related to job strain.

Job insecurity is a work-related stressor that has a negative impact on individuals' emotions and energy (Lim, 1997). Lazarus (1991) asserted that negative emotions should result from harms and threats to valued outcomes. Job insecurity, because it is appraised as having the potential to harm personal growth or gain, triggers negative emotions (Rodell and Judge, 2009). According to Dienstbier's (1989) physiological toughness model, the appraisal of threat as in doubts about one's capacity to cope, leads to suboptimal pattern of physiological arousal, which in turn leads to the experience of negative emotion. Agnew (1992) argued that actual or threatened removal of positively valued stimuli (e.g., loss of one's job) will lead to negative emotions.

H7: Job insecurity is positively related to negative emotion.

Empathy refers to the degree to which an individual notices and is concerned about the needs or concerns of others. Eisenberg et al. (2004) indicate that empathy related responding is linked to pro-social moral reasoning that focuses on others' welfare. Accordingly, empathy should be negatively related to moral disengagement because moral disengagement entails cognitive mechanisms that encourage unethical behaviors. Detert et al. (2008) propose that dispositional empathy should be negatively related to moral disengagement because individuals high on empathy are more likely to vicariously experience the feelings of others and to be concerned about those others' needs. As a result, individuals with high empathy should have low propensity to morally disengage through processes such as the moral justification of acts that would harm others or the dehumanization of the targets of those acts. They should also be less likely to distort the consequences (i.e., potential harm) of their actions or attribute blame to victims (Detert et al., 2008). Therefore, we theorize that IT professionals with high empathy will be lower in moral disengagement.

H8: Empathy is negatively related to moral disengagement.

Moral identity generally refers to the degree to which being a moral person is important to an individual's identity. Detert et al. (2008) propose that a highly self-important moral identity inhibits moral disengagement processes. In particular, moral identity inhibits cognitive processes that distort consequences by minimizing or misconstruing the level of harm to others. Detert et al. (2008) also suggest that moral identity should further inhibit those mechanisms that blame victims of harm or debase fellow humans. Reed and Aquino (2003) argued that moral identity enhances level of moral reasoning and perceived obligation to show concern for the welfare and interests of others. Accordingly, individuals with high moral identity are less likely to distort the consequences (i.e., potential harm) of their actions or attribute blame to victims. Therefore, we theorize that IT professionals with highly self-important moral identities will be lower in moral disengagement.

H9: Moral identity is negatively related to moral disengagement.

Pace of IT change refers to the degree to which an IT professional perceives technological changes to be rapid. Rapid changes may provoke multiple sources of uncertainty for the individual (e.g. job insecurity) (De Vogli, 2008). Constant innovation and rapid changes in ITs and the vast number of

options available render IT professionals' skills and experience obsolete. Further, due to limited cognitive resources, individuals often feel left out of the latest developments (Ayyagari et al., 2011). These increased demands due to pace of change of ITs may increase the levels of IT professionals' worries about being replaced by others with newer technology skills or being less valuable for their jobs. Ayyagari et al. (2011) found that pace of change is positively related to job insecurity. Therefore,

H10: Individual perception of technology pace of change is positively related to his or her perception of job insecurity.

Research Methodology

Measurement items will be adapted from the literature wherever possible. A small-scale pretest of the questionnaire will be conducted using 20 part-time graduate students specializing in information systems to fine-tune the questionnaire.

The population selected for this study is the IT employees (professionals). The research model will be tested with data collected from 300 IT employees of Taiwan's top 1000 companies. The survey will be conducted through online survey in order to speed the process and minimize some workload.

Data analysis will utilize a two-step approach. The first step involves the analysis of the measurement model, while the second step tests the structural relationships among latent constructs. LISREL will be used to assess both the measurement model and the structural model.

The adequacy of the measurement model will be evaluated with reliability, convergent validity, and discriminant validity. Two approaches will be used to estimate common method bias: Harman's one-factor test and the marker variable technique. The degree of multicollinearity will be assessed by using variance inflation factors (VIF). In structural model analysis, examining structural paths and the R-square scores of endogenous variables assesses the explanatory power of a structural model.

Potential Implications

This research makes three key contributions. First, this study applies the transactional model of stress and coping and moral disengagement theory to the context of IT professionals' turnover intention and deviance and empirically examines the relationship between job insecurity, negative emotion, strain, moral disengagement, turnover intention and deviance. Second, although empirical evidence has demonstrated that negative emotions matter for strain and deviance, fundamental gaps remain in the understanding of the mechanisms to reduce IT professionals' turnover intention and deviance. The study will help us get a better understanding of the relationships among those variables. Third, this study will contribute to our enhanced understanding of antecedents and consequences of IT professionals' moral disengagement. It is not only helpful in understanding how IT professionals might morally disengage, but may also prove helpful for managers of organizations to understanding the impact of moral disengagement on IT professionals' deviant behaviors.

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