

Planning and projecting critical human resource needs: the relationship between hope, optimism, organizational commitment, and turnover intention among U.S. Army reserve soldiers

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ABSTRACT

The U.S. Army Reserve struggles with retention and faces difficulties with soldier turnover. The intent of the study was to assess key psychological variables such as optimism and hope to establish how those traits might impact soldiers' level of organizational commitment and turnover intention in the Army. The sample consisted of 124 U.S. soldiers selected from an Army Reserve unit in Houston, TX. The results of the study indicate that hope and optimism correlate with affective commitment but not with continuance commitment. In addition, higher hope, optimism, affective commitment, and continuance commitment all resulted in correlations with lower turnover intention. Affective commitment and turnover intention possessed the strongest relationship. Significant levels of hope and optimism with affective commitment supports the idea that soldiers who are emotionally attached to the organization will most likely stay. Results of this study could provide Army Human Resource Command a basis for a strategy to retain key personnel.

Keywords: turnover, organizational commitment, hope, optimism, soldiers



Introduction

Turnover problems exist in the U.S. Army including the Army Reserves. Hill (2000) noted that the United States Army demonstrated difficulties in the recruiting and retention of soldiers as early as the 1920's. The Army still faces difficulties in soldier retention even today (Dunn, 2003; Hill, 2000). Lieutenant General Hagenbeck, Deputy Chief of Staff (July 19, 2005) stated to the Committee on House Armed Services, that the Army continues to face challenges in soldier retention and noted that the armed forces in general did not meet their recruitment or retention goals. The National Guard retention rate reached only 77 percent of retention goals and the Army retention as of June 2005 only reached 86 percent of retention goals. Hagenbeck (2005) noted the Army's annual manpower goals are at risk and that discussion should begin as to what to do about soldier retention issues. Since 9/11, soldiers' intention to stay, commitment, and intergroup conflict significantly affected soldier retention (Bliese & Stetz, 2007). Soldier satisfaction and well being impact components of Army National Guard, Active Army, and Army Reserve.

Burrell, Durand, and Fortado (2003) indicated that the Army Reserve is the top contributor for various operations over the past decade in the Army. In addition, the struggles with soldier retention should be addressed in order to overcome the retention challenges in the Army. Recent studies even addressed continuing issues of turnover struggles due to military satisfaction, organizational commitment (Lytell & Drasgow, 2009). Conflicting issues, civilian-military differences, and work relationships can warrant further investigation of soldier commitment and turnover in the Army, especially since the start of the Global War on Terrorism.

Turnover is a problem and an expensive consequence in the Army (Sims, Drasgow, & Fitzgerald, 2005). It can be very expensive to train, house, feed, and equip soldiers who, when their commitment ends, take their newly learned skills and use them in a civilian company (Hill, 2000). Retention is problematic for the Army for the following reasons: involuntary extension of enlistment contracts, available military occupation specialties (MOS's), Army pay, family issues, multiple deployments, and mental trauma (Griffith, 2005). Karrasch (2003) noted that emotional attachment to an organization may be crucial to an individual. Consequently, these stressors can cause a soldier to leave an organization and negatively affect their intention to stay affecting their levels of hope, optimism, and commitment to the organization. Luthans and Youssef (2007) noted that positive capacities such as hope and optimism can significantly impact an individual's likelihood to stay in an organization.

Turnover

Turnover can be defined as the act of leaving a current job such as moving to another job or relocating to another destination (Fields, Dingman, Roman, & Blum, 2005). Turnover can be caused by controllable factors (Fields et al., 2005). Controllable factors include employees leaving for other job opportunities. Voluntary employee turnover is one of the most studied behaviors in management research (Maertz & Campion, 2004). Voluntary turnover transpires when employees decide to leave, while involuntary separation occurs when management makes the decision to end an employee's service with the organization. External turnover refers to the employees that depart the organization entirely, while internal turnover consists of workers

deciding to leave a department but eventually choose to remain within in the company (Cleveland, 2005).

Predictors of turnover can involve areas of employee characteristics such as age, education, gender, and family responsibilities (Fields et al., 2005). In addition, variables such as the nature of the current profession including security, proficiency variety, and job stress can be indicators. Also, Fields et al. (2005) noted that the nature of the organization should be considered such as supervision, pay/benefits, current performance rating, and educational goals that might be significant for employees.

Based on previous behaviors following Desert Storm and the conflict in Iraq/Afghanistan, there could be more challenges with soldier retention. Two competing theories (Lakhani & Fugita, 1993) involving retention include the theory of moonlighting and patriotism theory. The moonlighting theory stipulates that Reservists hold both military jobs and civilian jobs because of underemployment or constraints of work. In contrast, the patriotism theory states that time dedicated to the Army Reserve may be for the common good.

Organizational Commitment

Organizational commitment can also be defined as strength of individual's identification with organizations including not-for-profits, private, or public sectors (Payne & Huffman, 2005). Areas of organizational commitment consist of affective and continuance commitment (Verhoef, 2003). Affective commitment can be classified as an employee's emotional attachment with the organization, while continuance commitment can be described as an awareness of the costs linked with leaving the organization (Verhoef, 2003). Affective commitment involves the psychological attachment based on loyalty to an individual or organization. For example, a soldier with affective commitment toward the Army Reserve may stay until retirement due to their positive experiences, whereas a soldier with continuance commitment may stay until the end of their obligation just to receive their benefits for time served.

Employees may be committed to their organization, but not on the basis of affective connection or identification with organizational values or goals (Jing & George, 2001). This type of commitment is referred to as continuance commitment. Continuance commitment can make certain that employees do not leave even though they may be dissatisfied and ensures that employees continue their service with their organizations. However, continuance commitment alone may not be sufficient for employee retention (Jing & George, 2001).

Organizational commitment could be a potentially useful technique for understanding turnover in military service. Gade et al. (2003) conducted a study on the relationship of commitment with positive well being on 1300 from a few Army posts. The Meyers Organizational commitment scale was used to determine the degree which a person displays affective and continuance commitment to an organization (Karrasch, 2003). The result of the study suggests that commitment relates with soldiers' inclination to stay in the Army and their positive mental well-being of various soldiers. Langkamer and Ervin (2008) indicated the psychological climate even affects career officers such as captains and the psychological climate dimension on leadership contained the largest impact on the commitment to the organization. Stewart, Bing, Gruys, and Helford (2007) noted that other variables combined with affective and continuance commitment can affect an individual's intention to stay such as various climate perceptions and personal affective attachment to the workplace. Personal

affective attachment can involve positive psychological variables such as optimism or even hope.

Hope

Constructs of hope began to be introduced into the psychological and psychiatric literature in the 1950's (Magaletta & Oliver, 1999). Hope can be defined as the belief that allows individuals to maintain development towards goals (Gillham, 2000). Hope can be a challenging force that pushes individuals to overcome psychological problems and can also be described as the interaction between wishes and expectations (Gillham, 2000). Simmons et al. (2003) identified hope as a positive emotion reflecting a degree of an expected benefit resulting from an evaluation of a particular situation.

Hope consists of having affective and cognitive components (Gillham, 2000). On the affective side, hope could be classified as the difference between expected positive and expected negative effects. Affective components can be applied to soldiers when they experience positive emotions from outcomes such receiving awards or forming quality relationships at the unit. In contrast, the cognitive component includes these expectations and the desires behind soldiers' goals. Cognitive factors apply to the thought process around awards and quality friendships formed at the unit.

Hope addresses the roles of barriers, stressors, and emotions (Gillham, 2000). These stressors occur in organizations at all levels. When encountering barriers that hinder goal pursuits, people can perceive the circumstances as stressful but if individuals have hope, a positive attitude can be utilized to deal with difficulties instead of just giving up. Furthermore, hopeful leaders should have more profitable work units and better retention rates than leaders with low hope.

Optimism

Optimism can be described as a generalized expectancy that individuals experience good outcomes in life (Gillham, 2000). Optimism could be the most powerful predictor of behavior in leading people to persist in goal pursuits. Optimism contains an expectation of a favorable outcome even when unfavorable results could occur.

People who might be optimistic engage in more focused coping in stressful situations (Chemers, Watson, & May, 2000; Gillham, 2000). Optimism can help people to adapt and accept the reality of a challenge quickly such as a soldier being sent overseas. Optimistic individuals appear to display less signs of disengagement than someone pessimistic. This could be important for soldiers especially when they need to perform tasks efficiently under a great deal of stress.

In addition, optimism can play a role in educational, occupational, and psychological adjustment. Optimism is associated with high levels of career planning, exploration, and personal/career goals (El-Anzi, 2005). An optimistic soldier may feel that her/his achievement will be worth staying in the Army in spite of negative aspects of his/her career choice. In contrast, pessimism can be associated with career indecisiveness, low achievement, and high psychological distress. Pessimists might be less likely to make efforts to ensure their well-being and will many times engage in self-defeating patterns (Carver & Scheier, 2002). Some pessimists may engage in habits such as substance abuse, sleeping disorders, evading personal

situations, or possibly suicide, especially when dealing with life tasks. Thus, a more hopeful and optimistic individual may overcome life stressors and make the best out of the organization.

Relation between Hope, Optimism, Organizational Commitment, and Turnover Intention

As explained in the literature, hope and optimism appear to be different but still encompass common characteristics. Optimism, unlike hope can be defined as a generalized expectation that an individual will experience good things in life, rather than hope which refers more to trust or reliance and “desire accompanied with expectation of obtaining what is desired or belief that it is obtainable” (Merriam, 1971, p. 1089). Both hope and optimism involve expectations and desires to meet goals (Bryant & Cvengros, 2004). Consequently, this could cause soldiers to demonstrate an emotional attachment rather than an obligation to an organization. In other words, soldiers who are hopeful and optimistic may display a stronger affective commitment to their organization rather than a continuance commitment. Therefore, affective but not continuance commitment relates with soldiers’ hope and optimism (Karrasch, 2003).

Gade et al. (2003) noted that commitment can be related with retention of soldiers and their positive mental well-being attributes (e.g., hope and optimism). McClure and Broughton (1988) indicated that soldiers in individual Army units sometimes do not demonstrate cohesion with each other due to professional and personal reasons. This problem intensifies when soldiers are deployed and/or separated from the unit and their families. Therefore, soldiers’ personal and professional problems can negatively impact their hope and optimism which can cause turnover. This problem sometimes causes soldiers to return to civilian life. However, some soldiers can overcome these obstacles with high hope and optimism and decide to stay in the Army due to their affective commitment to the Army.

Hypotheses

Hypothesis #1

Hope and optimism positively predict affective commitment but not continuance commitment.

Hypothesis #2

Hope, optimism, affective commitment, and continuance commitment positively relate to turnover intention.

Method

Participants

The sample consisted of 157 U.S. soldiers selected from a Houston Army Reserve unit. Nineteen soldiers refused to participate and fourteen soldiers did not fully complete the survey, resulting in a final sample of 124 participants.

The sample was ethnically diverse. The Ethnicities included Caucasians ($n = 47$), African Americans ($n = 38$), Hispanics ($n = 22$), and other ($n = 17$) In addition, soldiers’ ages

ranged from 17-60 years old, with the average age of 35. Both male ($n = 72$) and female ($n = 52$) soldiers participated. Also, the study included both enlisted ($n = 75$) and officers ($n = 49$).

Measures

The first part of the questionnaire was a demographic section that asked for the gender, marital status, age, ethnicity, Army rank, years of service in active/reserve military, and the next reenlistment date. The next part of the questionnaire contained the Life Orientation Test (Lopez & Snyder, 2002), the Meyer and Allen Organizational Commitment scale (Payne & Huffman, 2005), the Staats Hope Scale (Lopez & Snyder, 2002), and questions related to turnover intention.

Life Orientation Test. The Life Orientation Test (LOT) was utilized to establish the degree to which a person displays optimistic or pessimistic thoughts. The researcher used the 16 items that involved the extent an individual wished or expected situations to occur. Answers for each item were assessed by utilizing a 5-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. The LOT has shown sound internal consistency (Chronbach's $\alpha = .76$) and the test-retest reliability reflects the dispositional quality of the construct, $r = .79$ (Lopez & Snyder, 2002).

Organizational Commitment Scale. The organizational commitment scale was used to establish the degree to which a person displays affective and continuance commitment to an organization. A person's affective commitment determined an individual's emotional attachment to the organization, while continuance commitment demonstrated commitment due to obligation. The researcher used a 5-point Likert scale with responses ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree among the affective and continuance commitment scales. The affective scale and continuance scale have an acceptable reliability ($\alpha = .68$, $\alpha = .71$, respectively; Karrasch, 2003).

Staats Hope Index. The hope scale established the extent to which people cognitively display hope with their family, health, emotions, country, and life/personal goals (Lopez & Snyder, 2002). The Staats index demonstrated moderate test-retest reliabilities scores and internal consistency (Lopez & Snyder, 2002) ($\alpha = .72-.85$). In addition, construct validity was present based on correlations with related scales (Lopez & Snyder, 2002).

Turnover Inventories. A set of turnover intention questions was used to assess an individual's goal to stay in the Army. Soldiers were assessed regarding their motivation to advance and their desire to stay in the Army. Survey items included the following type of statements: *I would like to serve in the Army until retirement*, *Opportunities in the civilian world outweigh opportunities outside the Army*, *My civilian career is a higher priority than my military career*, *If I had to choose between being a full-time civilian for the next 10 years I would choose the Army*. A 5-point scale consisted of responses of strongly disagree to strongly agree.

Procedure

The participants were first given two consent form copies for the study during a Unit Battle Assembly. The participants signed the bottom and tore off the consent form, which was given back to the researcher. The participants kept the other copy for themselves in case they had future questions and concerns about the study. Third, the participants were given the scales and measures, which included the Life Orientation Test, Organizational Commitment scale,

Staats Hope index, and turnover intention inventory. Once the participants were finished, they turned in the survey.

Results

Hypothesis # 1

A correlation was performed between hope and optimism scores with affective and continuance commitment scores. There were positive relationships between hope and affective commitment, $r(124) = .37, p < .001$ as well as optimism and affective commitment, $r(124) = .25, p < .001$. However, there was no association between hope and continuance commitment, $r(124) = .01, p > .05$, nor between optimism and continuance commitment, $r(124) = -.12, p > .05$. Thus, hope and optimism correlated with affective commitment but not continuance commitment.

Hypothesis # 2

A correlation was conducted on soldiers' hope, optimism, affective commitment, and continuance commitment in relation to turnover intention. A significant correlation was found between hope and turnover intention, $r(124) = .32, p < .001$. The following additional correlations were also statistically significant: optimism and turnover, $r(124) = .20, p < .05$ continuance commitment and turnover, $r(124) = .51, p < .001$, and affective commitment and turnover, $r(124) = .78, p < .001$. Hope, optimism, affective commitment, and continuance commitment all related to turnover intention. Of these, affective commitment and turnover intention had the strongest relationship.

Discussion

The first hypothesis tested whether hope and optimism predicted affective commitment and continuance commitment. The researcher found that there were positive relationships between hope and optimism among soldiers' affective commitment. However, there was no relationship between hope and optimism with soldiers' continuance commitment. These results might indicate that soldiers may feel more optimistic and hopeful toward an organization with which they feel an emotional connection (Verhoef, 2003). In contrast, soldiers who feel less optimistic and hopeful toward an organization may leave an organization with which they feel no emotional connection. Soldiers with strong affective commitment and emotional attachment may believe that their values match their employers and could feel that they have obtained a positive organizational fit (Sinclair, Tucker, Cullen, & Wright, 2005). Unfortunately, some soldiers still leave the Army despite their seniority and security successes (Jing & George, 2001).

The second hypothesis tested whether there was a significant relationship between hope, optimism, affective commitment, and continuance commitment in relation to turnover intention in the Army. There was a significant relationship between all these variables with turnover intention among soldiers. Despite the variables all correlating, the variables do not necessarily indicate a causal relationship (Babbie, 2005). There are criteria for causality including: a time order cause before the effect which is present, variables must be related with each other (X must change or cause Y) in a relationship, and the correlation cannot be explained by adding a third

variable to the study. Unfortunately, turnover correlating with all the variables constituted a relationship but not necessarily a causal relationship.

Figure 1 presents a model describing the relationship between predicted turnover with hope, optimism, affective commitment, and continuance commitment. In this model affective commitment comes in between hope/optimism and turnover intention. Affective commitment relates with both hope and optimism. In addition, hope, optimism, and turnover intention all related with affective commitment. Specifically, the strongest relationship involved affective commitment. In addition, continuance commitment and affective commitment contained a significant relationship for controlling the other variables of hope and optimism.

Soldiers who want to stay in the Army demonstrate higher hope, optimism, affective commitment, and continuance commitment based on the results. Consequently, the two different paths to turnover intention include affective commitment and continuance commitment since they appear to mediate the other variables. This analysis supports both the patriotism and moonlighting theories. Patriotism theory supports the connection of affective commitment and turnover intention, while moonlighting theory supports the relationship between continuance commitment and turnover intention (Lakhani & Fugita, 1993). The patriotism theory states that time dedicated to the Army Reserves may be for the common good of the nation which means that Reservists may feel stronger affective commitment to the Army Reserves and may be more apt to stay. In contrast, moonlighting theory notes that Reservists hold both military and civilian jobs because of constraints of work which might indicate that Reservists may feel a stronger continuance commitment and may leave due to opportunities in the civilian public/private sector.

Implications

Overall, the high level of hope and optimism with affective commitment supports the idea that soldiers who are emotionally attached to the organization will most likely stay. However, the Army does work to retain soldiers with monetary incentives such as additional allowances for serving in combat zones which can affect their continuance commitment (Dunn, 2003). In addition, Huffman, Adler, Dolan, and Castro (2005) noted that rank and pay in the Army can affect soldiers' intent to stay. However, monetary incentives do not always prevent people from leaving an organization (Bufe & Murphy, 2004). According to Karrasch (2003), emotional attachment to an organization may be more important. These results support the idea that training programs and mentor programs could help soldiers to be more hopeful and optimistic about their future by increasing their affective commitment to the Army. Soldiers may feel more positive toward an organization that will help mentor them and train them to standard. Thus, turnover is reduced with these newly implemented strategies of the Army.

Improving Hope, Optimism, Affective/Continuance Commitment

One can speculate that the U.S. military can utilize other ways to improve hope in the Army. It is important to also find out soldiers' personal and professional goals/objectives. Leaders of some units conduct this strategy in the initial counseling stages when soldiers first get to the unit. Also, leaders can provide quality training so soldiers can reach their career goals. Hope can be decreased when leaders do not help soldiers' reach their goals due to poor preparation for promotions and professional training. This strategy can also help soldiers'

affective commitment to the organization. Soldiers may feel a stronger emotional attachment if they believe that leaders care about the soldiers' career and well-being. In addition, one can also speculate that the U.S. military can find other ways to increase optimism. Huffman, Cubertson, and Castro (2008) noted that especially since the start of the Global War on Terrorism, the Army works to emphasize a family-friendly environment to enhance soldier cohesiveness which in return can improve soldier's well being and their intention to stay. However, some soldiers may feel more motivated by monetary incentives or college money resulting from continuance commitment. This is why the Army should still continue reenlistment bonuses and money for college. Overall, these changes could also help soldiers to display more hope, and optimism, and commitment to the Army.

Potential Limitations and Future Studies

A potential limitation may exist with forecasting actual turnover intention. However, according to Sousa-Poza and Henneberger (2004), turnover intentions can be immediate precursors to turnover and these intentions may forecast actual quits. Hendrix, Robbins, Miller, and Summers (1998) noted that turnover could be indirectly related to other possible issues such as teamwork and intrinsic satisfaction at work. Therefore, using turnover intention instead of turnover is not likely to be a problem. Nevertheless, in a future study it would be useful to measure actual turnover.

Another limitation is that this study only included one Army Reserve unit rather than a comparison of several units. It might be interesting to see a comparison of other units to see if similar results would yield. Some medical units may have different relationships due to the location of unit and/or the individuals of the unit. In addition, this unit was a hospital unit. It would be interesting to research other units such as Infantry, Supply, Aviation, and Finance. Differences may be expected due to the relationships of hope, optimism, and organizational commitment of the various units being trained in areas such as office support and/or combat operations.

These findings cannot be generalized to all of the military but possibly to some of the branches. For example, branches such as the Marines may possess higher hope, optimism, and organizational commitment due to cohesiveness and motivation needed to survive in frequent combat circumstances. Thus, members of the Marines Corps may possess stronger relationships between hope, optimism, and organizational commitment than an Army unit. Also, some branches such as the Navy or Air Force may not need as high levels of hope, optimism, and affective commitment due to less close combat situations.

In addition, some factors must be considered for future research such as type of unit (hospital, infantry, or supply), type of command, and the group of soldiers in the unit (Thompson, 2005). For example, some units may consist of soldiers who stay in the service for their civilian education/career goals rather than serving for the love of military career goals and way of life. Further research could also include testing soldiers upon enlistment and tracking longitudinally to determine whether measures of hope and optimism can be accurate measures of retention.

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Appendix

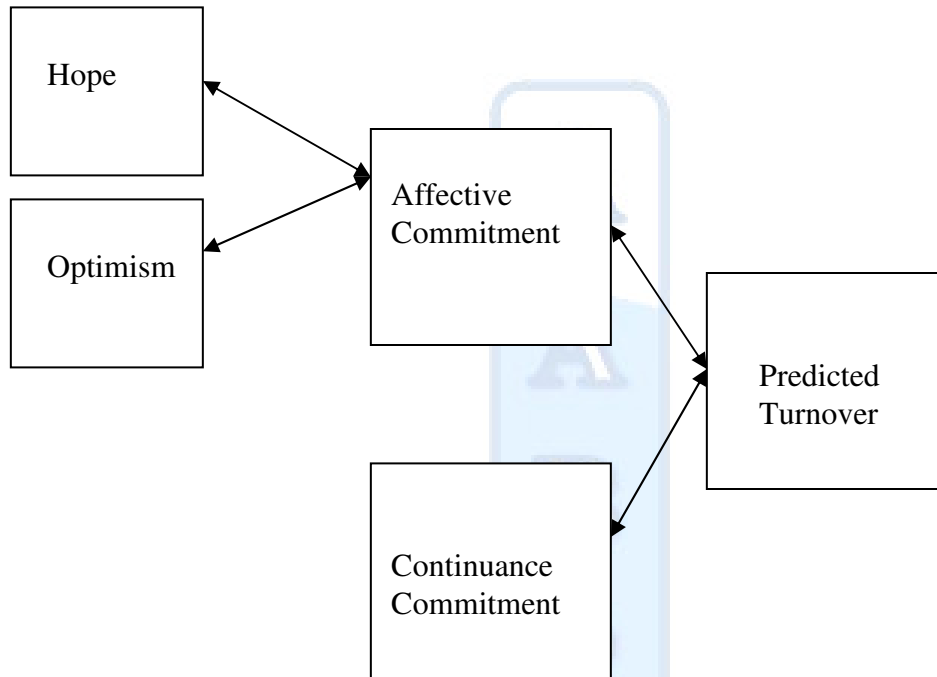


Figure 1: Relationship between Hope, Optimism, Organizational Commitment, and Turnover Intention in the U.S. Army Reserve