

# R E T E N T I O N

## ***EXECUTIVE SUMMARY***

### **RETENTION IN THE ARMED FORCES: PAST APPROACHES AND NEW RESEARCH DIRECTIONS**

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## Executive Summary

Military turnover is a significant problem encountered throughout the military, and increasing the retention of qualified military personnel is an important goal for all branches of the Armed Forces. While research on military retention has been extensive, much remains to be done. A coherent theoretical framework on military turnover is needed to guide research on the effects of quality of life and quality of work factors on turnover decisions. Without an overarching framework, individual findings remain fragmented, the possibility for innovative research is reduced, and true understanding of the problem is constrained. We believe that understanding the process of turnover – how the development of commitment and the turnover decision unfold over time – will extend the current knowledge base.

The purpose of this report is to review existing frameworks for understanding turnover decisions and to provide a new framework for future research on military retention, particularly in respect to the relationship between retention and quality of life. Section 1 provides a summary of retention research conducted using military populations. Section 2 presents an overview of the wide array of theories that have been developed to understand individual turnover decisions. Section 3 discusses the usefulness of applying general theories of commitment and attachment developed within the field of social psychology to understand turnover and retention. A proposed integrated framework of

organizational retention concludes this review in Section 4.

It is the position of this paper that the most state-of-the-art road map for understanding the nature of military retention is achieved through the synthesis of past military research and relevant psychological theories. The strengths, shortcomings, and utility of theories and their subsequent models are discussed from both theoretical and pragmatic perspectives. Also included is a discussion of the implications for both future research and policy directions.

## Military Retention Research

Numerous reports have been generated that detail important factors related to the retention plans and subsequent retention behavior of military personnel. Research examining military retention typically has been conducted in one of three ways: large-scale survey research, research based on multivariate economic models, and research based on individual process models.

### Survey research

Large-scale survey research is primarily concerned with describing the relationships between numerous factors and the retention behavior of military personnel. This research has found factors such as basic pay, job security, family medical care, and strong marriages to be related to members' intentions to stay in the military; basic pay, amount of personal and

family time, deployments, and civilian career opportunities have been found to be related to members' decisions to leave the military.<sup>1,2</sup> Additionally, this research found that members whose spouses are also satisfied with military life live in higher-quality communities, report using higher levels of services in their communities, and are most likely to stay in the military.<sup>3</sup> While the general interest in studying factors that influence military members' retention behavior is a common feature that brings this large area of research together, an overarching limitation is that little attention has been paid to the role of theory in carrying out, interpreting, and most important, integrating the large number of findings that have been borne from these surveys.

## **Economic models**

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In addition to identifying important factors related to the retention behaviors of military personnel, researchers have applied general principles from economic models of occupational choice to the study of retention. By applying these basic theoretical principles, researchers have been quite successful in developing a number of multivariate statistical models that can and have been used to predict the effects of large-scale policy changes on the retention behavior of military personnel. For example, through the application of the Annualized Cost of Leaving Model, small increases in Selective Reenlistment Bonuses were found to be associated with moderate increases in reenlistments for certain sub-populations of marines<sup>4</sup> The use of multivariate models in the study of military retention can yield research findings that have direct implications for policy; however, some of the assumptions associated with the economic models appear to be flawed. For example, these models assume that all individuals go through a rational decision-making process when choosing to remain in or leave the military. If the basic assumptions of the theory driving the research are

not valid, it is difficult to interpret the knowledge generated from these studies.

## **Individual process models**

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The third method by which retention research generally has been conducted with the military population is through the empirical evaluation of individual process models. For example, a recent model of retention of enlisted marines – in which reenlistment was the outcome – was conceptualized to be a function of demographic characteristics, military experience, cognitive satisfaction with military life, concerns over force reduction, and external factors such as alternative civilian job opportunities<sup>5</sup> The results from the study demonstrated that many of the factors proposed were significant predictors of retention behavior, but they depended upon the marine's gender and term of service. While the original model did not postulate different pathways of turnover, results that suggested such could have been used to refine the original model to guide further research efforts with greater precision. As this study demonstrates, one limitation within research on military retention is the insufficient use of theory to guide research, as well as the insufficient use of research to refine theory.

It is clear that there is much room for improvement in military retention research literature. The significant roles of theory and process have been underemphasized and underutilized. Theory plays an instrumental role in quality research by guiding research toward parsimony. Theory also provides a lens through which research findings can be interpreted. Related to theory is the matter of process. Process addresses not only the question of whether a particular factor is related to a specific outcome, but more importantly, it addresses the question of how a particular factor influences a specific outcome. By attempting to understand the process linking a particular factor and a specific outcome,

researchers can more effectively develop interventions.

## General Theories of Turnover and Their Implications for Understanding Military Retention

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Numerous theories of turnover are discussed in this review. Here, we summarize some of the key features that emerge from this literature.

### Rationality

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Most turnover theories are “rational.” That is, they envision a turnover decision based upon judgments of costs and benefits. However, it appears that strictly rational theories may be limited in their ability to understand turnover. Affective experiences influence the development of satisfaction and commitment, and people often over-respond to particular events in their lives and their workplaces. The significance and limitations of rationality, particularly in the context of the military’s structured time frame for retention decisions, needs to be examined.

### Investments

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The addition of “investments” to a retention model is justified by several research findings<sup>6</sup>. Job investments are the irretrievable resources that are tied to the job that would be lost if the individual were to quit; they serve to promote stability and increase job commitment. Investments may be abstract (e.g., self-concept associated with the job) or tangible (e.g., military housing provided to members); and direct (e.g., a pension plan) or indirect (e.g., friends one has made while being in the military). In the military, investments are often an incentive to stay. After two duty periods, a

military member is nearing the halfway point to military retirement tenure and the benefits that result. Institutionalized contract periods are likely to force larger investments than might otherwise be the case. Furthermore, time served and military self-concept act as investments promoting retention. The concept of investments is clearly important, and the study of the nature of these investments and how they develop and influence turnover decisions is warranted.

### Multiple paths

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There is clearly more than one route to quitting a job. Some people may have non-work influences pulling them away, whereas others have lost their sense of identity as a “military person,” or simply have been offered better pay and benefits elsewhere. At the same time, there must be a limit on the number of paths proposed within a model of turnover. It is important to distinguish among the principle paths that people take to arrive at the decision to leave the military. If interventions are to be successful, they must cover all major pathways of job departure.

### Economic conditions

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Economic conditions of the environment are explicitly or implicitly taken into account in many theories. Economic conditions can have both direct and indirect effects on retention behavior. However, the perspective that economic conditions affect retention through their influence on individual perceptions and expectations is missing in the current military models of turnover. Employees may construe their current job as less desirable when appealing outside alternatives are available. Furthermore, as current military models of retention have found, economic conditions directly affect decisions to stay or leave. During times of economic prosperity, even satisfied military members may opt out of renewing their contract because of

available alternatives outside the military<sup>7</sup>. Job switching during times of economic prosperity is also found throughout the civilian environment<sup>8</sup>.

## **Non-work influences**

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Early theories of turnover did not consider non-work influences, or anything not specifically related to employment. For example, individuals with commitments outside of their own personal needs (e.g., those with family obligations) may be more likely to incorporate non-work factors when deciding to remain in or leave their current job. More current theories do consider the influence of non-work factors on job turnover and retention<sup>9</sup>. Military members are not immune to the influence of non-work factors. Spouses and family members have needs and desires that influence employment decisions among military members. With the permanent changes of station and “leaves” inherent in military life, outside relationships can become strained. As a result, non-work influences on job turnover may be more prominent in military families than in non-military families. Although the military has already begun to respond to the needs of military spouses and families to increase retention rates, it is imperative for this issue to be incorporated into any theory of military retention.

## **Withdrawal behaviors**

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Quitting one’s job is not the only way in which people can “withdraw” from their jobs. An expansion of potential withdrawal behaviors, such as absenteeism, tardiness, and extra time away from the desk, are only a few of the many possible “job withdrawal” behaviors. Because military members are tied to firm contracts, there is greater concern for the expression of alternative withdrawal behaviors than in other organizations. Employment contracts will keep a person in the organization, but increase the possible

manifestation of alternative behaviors as a release for dissatisfaction with the job<sup>10</sup>. Those who have made the decision to leave at the end of their terms but are held within the military until their contract expires are more likely to exhibit alternative withdrawal behaviors, according to nearly all organizational withdrawal models.

## **Proposed Framework to Study Organizational Retention**

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By integrating the retention research conducted by the military with existing theories of job turnover and social psychological theory, a process framework of retention is proposed. This framework will provide a useful tool for guiding research in both civilian and military turnover. The framework borrows from past models of retention by featuring many of the common components, such as commitment, environmental shocks, and non-work factors. Furthermore, job satisfaction, perceived job alternatives, investments, and norms are included as separate components of job commitment.

Consistent with the theoretical approaches outlined throughout the following paper, the construct of commitment is a focal point of the proposed framework of retention. However, most theoretical approaches to commitment – particularly organizational commitment – are static, taking a “snapshot” of commitment and its antecedents without acknowledging the processes by which commitment levels develop over time. Thus, for both military and civilian populations, our framework depicts commitment as a developing process that influences stay/leave decisions.

In addition, our framework adds two additional components to commitment as important influences on turnover decisions. The first

addition component is “shocks.” These shocks, or unexpected events, are believed to ignite thought processes as to the pros and cons of staying with an organization. The second additional factor that is of particular relevance to the Armed Forces is the normal time structure of military turnover. A contract for a term of service is an added variable that filters the effect of both shocks and commitment. It constrains the possibility of withdrawal and may lead members to act out their dissatisfaction in other dysfunctional ways. It also may influence the extent to which various work and non-work events are interpreted. Shocks are proposed to have a stronger impact on commitment as military members approach the end of their term of service.

In short, shocks raise the possibility of leaving, commitment influences the impact of the shocks, and the natural time frame of military turnover constrains the effect of shocks and commitment on actual turnover.

## Conclusion and Future Directions

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Constructive research on organizational retention should be guided by a theoretically grounded framework and supported by longitudinal investigations that can inform and verify the important processes involved. The process framework described herein provides a roadmap to guide the integration of past research and the development of newer, innovative research on turnover processes and their relationships with work and non-work factors. Military research has tended to lack continuity in the use and revision of theoretical models. However, for optimal comprehension, a long-term perspective needs to be assumed in order to effectively examine the processes involved with retention. As such, a small number of studies is not sufficient for the explanation of the retention-turnover process in the military; a research program is needed.

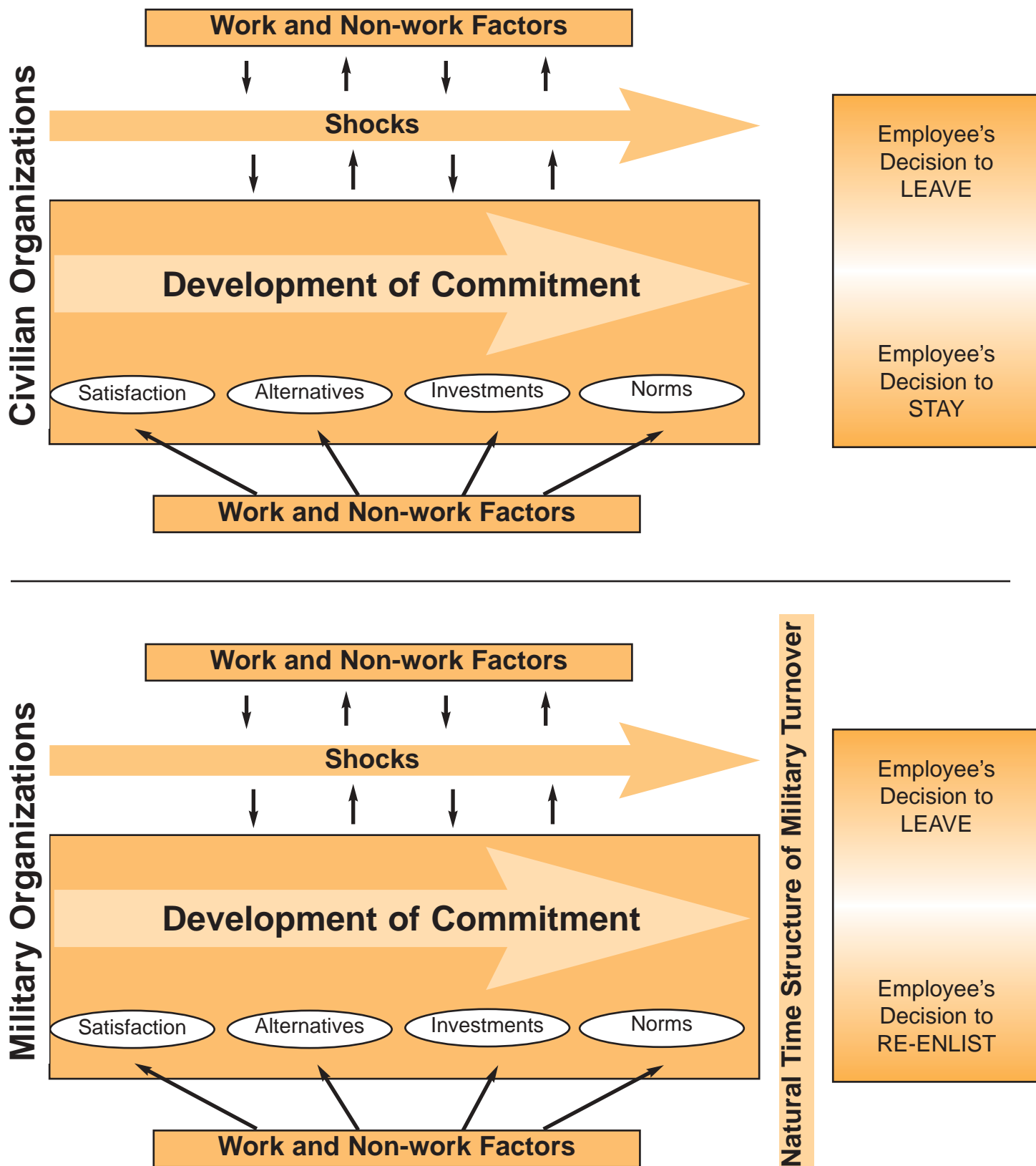
A research program based on the proposed integrated framework of organizational retention will serve to enhance our understanding as to why some military members choose to remain in service, and why others do not. It is at this individual process level where the crux of policy issues can be found; where the Quality of Life programs can be informed; and where the ensuing interventions can be targeted.

## Endnotes

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- 9 Lee, T. W. & Mitchell, T. R. (1994). An alternative approach: The Unfolding Model of voluntary employee turnover. Academy of Management Review, 19, 51-89.
- 10 Mobley, W. H., Griffeth, R. W., Hand, H. H., & Meglino, B. M. (1979). Review and conceptual analysis of the employee turnover process. Psychological Bulletin, 86, 493-522.

Figure 1. A framework to study organizational retention.





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