

# Turnover Contagion: Exploring the Ripple Effects of Employee Departures in Organizations

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## **Abstract**

The current study focused on understanding Turnover Contagion, where the job withdrawal of one employee sets in the departure of his or colleagues. The research focused on developing an understanding of factors responsible for generating Turnover Contagion and the role of underlying forces like culture, leadership, job embeddedness, team dynamics, etc. The aim was also to explore the consequences of this ripple effect on team performance, morale, and organizational stability. The study also highlights the importance of Relationship Mapping in predicting the setting in of Turnover Contagion. Through theoretical analysis, this study aims to provide insights and strategies for mitigating the negative effects of turnover contagion and fostering a more resilient and stable workforce.

**Key words:** Turnover Contagion, Ripple Effect, Emotional Contagion, Voluntary Exit

## **Introduction**

It's natural for Human Beings to mimic the Behavior, Actions and Thoughts of others around them. The same instinct makes employees become acculturated to the norms and behavioral patterns of their organization. As much as an employee conforms to the working pattern of an organization, they also get attracted to follow on the paths of quitting an organization. This unconscious influence is a powerful force which may lead to multiple resignations, also coined as Domino Effect in an Organization. When a co-worker resigns it sets in as a catalyst for other employees which makes them re-evaluate their job satisfaction, engagement, burnout, growth prospects, and work life balance. Its high time that organizations stop underestimating the impact that resignation of one employee has on their peer's urge to start looking in for better job prospects. Many organizations overlook the impact that quitting of a colleague has on the turnover behavior of those associated or in close ties with them. This

research explored the existing literature to understand the probable causes of this rippling effect. The focus was on understanding the pre-existing predictor models of Turnover Contagion, and preventive measures to avoid the same. Research by Globoforce, 2014 at an international employee recognition company, revealed that the more the number of friends people have at work, the more will be their productivity, engagement and happiness, and the more likely they will be to stay. The same also impact their view regarding withdrawal from the company. The stronger the work ties are the stronger would be its impact on leave or stay decisions of the employees.

## **Defining Turnover Contagion**

Through a Deep study on available literature on Turnover it was found that Felps et al. introduced the concept of Turnover Contagion in 2009 and explained the why employees leave when a coworker leaves. According to a study by The Society of Human Resource Management (SHRM), voluntary exit on an employee is largely influenced by coworkers' behaviours and attitudes, especially job embeddedness. It can be inferred that individuals with strong connect with a colleague who is involved in proactive job search behaviours get influenced and are also likely to choose an exit from the organization. Previous studies have highlighted that an individual's intent to leave is often an end result of a group process. Bartunek et al, 2008 in their research focused on collective turnover, and defined it as "the turnover of two or more organizational members in close temporal proximity based on shared social processes and decisions to leave an organization".

In recent years researchers predicted that along with actual exit from the organization the pre-exit behaviors of individuals also act as influencers on those working with them (Gardner, Van Iddekinge, and Hom 2018). Self-expressed thoughts and feelings related to turnover intention act as the pre-quitting cues (Porter and Rigby Citation, 2021). In the year 2021, Porter and Rigby proposed that turnover contagion, is not only turnover-related behaviors that spread among employees but also turnover-related thoughts and feelings. These psychological pre-quitting cues by co-workers could include factors such as engagement, job satisfaction, or organizational commitment.

## **What Triggers Turnover Contagion?**

In 2008 Bartunek et al. suggested a process model for collective turnover. The three-stage model escalates with interaction process and culminates in unfolding of collective turnover. In the initial phase two or more employees of an organizational group are dissatisfied with one or the other aspect of the organization, which remains unresolved. Later, these Second, negative

experiences of an individual get transformed into shared group perceptions through virality of emotional contagion. At last, when group members do not sense improvement and also have other opportunities available with few constraints on leaving, they collectively decide to depart and detach from their organization, and begin an active Job Search.

Although there is a clear psychological theory of emotional contagion explaining how the emotional contagion process operates (i.e. people “catch” an emotional stimulus through behavioural mimicry, facial feedback and efference, mirror neurons, emotional comparison processes, and the like; for reviews, see Elfenbein, 2014, Hatfield et al., 2014, Kelly and Barsade, 2001), there is not yet a specific theory of emotional contagion in organizational life.

Heavy, 2014 in her study categorised the multitude of collective turnover antecedents into six categories: (a) HRM inducements and investments, (b) HRM expectation-enhancing practices, (c) shared attitudes toward the job and organization, (d) quality of work group and supervisory relations, (e) job alternative signals, and (f) job embeddedness signals.

The current research refers to Turnover Contagion as phenomenon where the departure of one employee from an organization influences others to leave as well. This can happen for various reasons, which are listed below:

- **Leadership Departure:** If a respected leader or manager leaves a team, it might create a sense of uncertainty or dissatisfaction among the remaining team members. They may feel disheartened or question their own future within the organization, leading to a higher likelihood of additional departures.
- **Close-Knit Teams:** In tightly-knit teams where members have strong personal or professional relationships, the departure of one team member can have a domino effect. The remaining members may feel a sense of loss, and if the reasons for the departure are perceived as negative, it could trigger a chain reaction of resignations.
- **Shared Dissatisfaction:** If employees share common grievances about their work environment, management practices, or company policies, the departure of one dissatisfied employee might inspire others to follow suit. This is particularly true if the reasons for leaving resonate with a broader group within the organization.
- **Company Culture Shift:** Changes in company culture, especially those that are perceived negatively by employees, can trigger turnover contagion. If employees feel that the culture no longer aligns with their values or work preferences, they may be more inclined to leave, especially if someone they

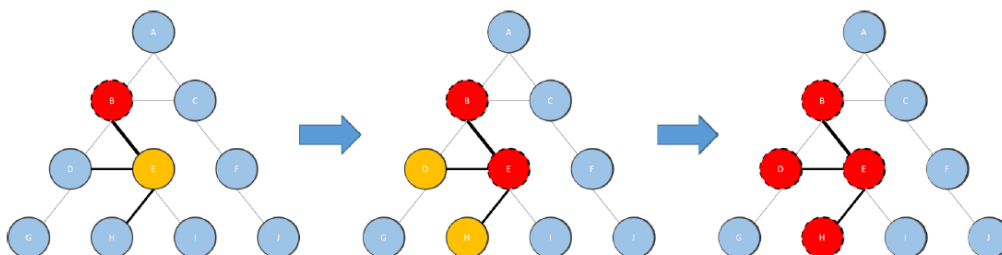
respect has already done so.

- **Lack of Career Development Opportunities:** If one employee leaves due to a perceived lack of career development opportunities, others who share the same concerns may be prompted to consider leaving as well. This is especially true in industries where career advancement is highly valued.
- **Negative Workplace Events:** Instances of workplace conflict, harassment, or other negative events can lead to turnover contagion. If one employee experiences such an event and decides to leave, others who witnessed or were affected by the situation may also choose to depart.
- **Market Perception:** External factors, such as negative media coverage or a decline in the company's public image, can contribute to turnover contagion. Employees may become concerned about the long-term viability of the organization and decide to leave to safeguard their careers.

It's important for organizations to be aware of turnover contagion and address underlying issues to prevent a ripple effect of resignations. Building a positive work culture, addressing employee concerns, and maintaining open lines of communication can help mitigate the risk of turnover contagion.

### **Relationship Mapping: Diagnose Turnover Contagion**

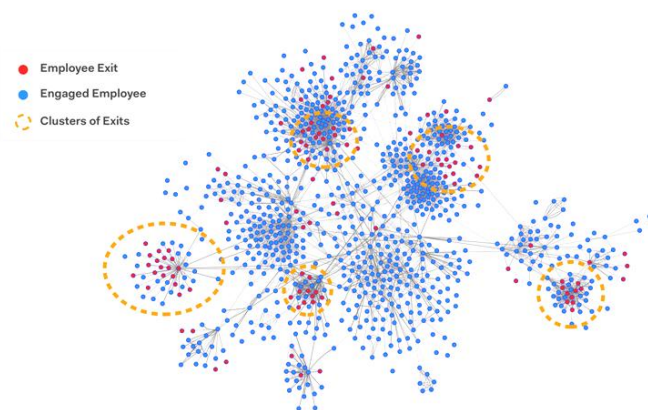
In 2019, Teng et al. stated in their study social contagious effect in Turnover, has a complex nature. Departure Ripple affects individual employees differently and is based on factors like: Power & Position and strength of connections between employees. Also, it was noted that Turnover Contagion varies with Time, due to its broadcasting and decaying mechanisms on the social network of employees in a company. A series of prior turnovers may produce a cumulative effect in the time window for prediction. This effect is even stronger for larger teams. The profiling of employees and their working environments is both heterogeneous and dynamic in nature. Figure 1 depicts work of Teng et al. where they modelled a process multiple contagious effect for employee turnover, where each node is an employee (i.e., blue is normal, red is a turnover, and yellow is an influenced one), the link between nodes represents the connection (i.e., stronger connection has bolder line weight).



## Figure 1

According to Blog by Workylitics written in November 2018, with use of metadata from common digital tools, we can map out employee networks which can help us identify individual's most important connections are at work. By combining this information with Employee Turnover Data, companies can analyse the long-term outcomes of employees following the departure of a close peer. They stated that: "exits are strongly clustered within peer networks. That is, after an employee exits a team, their direct peers can be 2 to 3X more likely to exit as well." It was noted from the blog that individual role and team connectedness are major players in this work dynamics. The exit of a highly-connected individual (*an influencer*) is typically more impactful. This effect is even stronger in densely connected teams.

Network Analysis: Identifying Clusters of Employee Turnover



## Figure 2

Both the models clearly highlight the role relationship networks play in both retention and attrition of employees in an organization. If used wisely and analytically the neural networks of co-workers can prove to be instrumental in collecting critical information related to behaviours and emotions with may at that time may be spreading like wild fire in an organization. The current study has set in the curiosity to model the use of Relationship Mapping through theoretical and data driven analysis in future.

## Prevention Strategies for Turnover Contagion

As Turnover Contagion has detrimental effect of organizational productivity and goodwill, it is essential for companies to that the cue to diagnose it before it sets in with full magnitude. Some preventive strategies can act as a stich in time to repair and damage control the situation before it moves out of control.

Being Proactive is the key. When any key employee leaves it's critical that organizations have a process for reacting quickly. Waiting too long leaves the

remaining team at serious risk. Taking action before small issues grow into larger problems can significantly decrease the risk of turnover in the first place. Take cues for changes in behavior, activity, or mood among employees who might be affected by a recent exit. The sooner you engage with a disaffected employee, the less chance there is that it will have a ripple effect on the rest of the team. Conduction of Exit Interviews to tap the unheard rumours, can help organizations figure out if there are other issues at play. Focus on employees who act as main influencers in their circle to ensure that they feel engaged and committed to the organization and help spread the same feeling all across the groups. Managers should openly address any exit with the remaining members of a team. If there are deeper issues at play, discussing them and taking action is the best way to ensure they don't recur.

## Conclusion

Through deep analysis of theoretical data and articles present around Turnover Contagion it is evident that departure of one single employee can prove to be highly viral in an organization. It is therefore essential that organizations must work to proactively retain talent by focusing on employee experience. And when turnover does happen, it's critical that leaders react quickly to prevent further spread. The good news is negative emotions might spread, but so does positivity. Managers should be enthusiastic about projects, build trust among their team, lead with empathy and compassion - employees will reward them with similarly positive outlooks.

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