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TURNING OVER VERSUS TURNING AWAY OF INFORMATION SYSTEMS PROFESSIONALS

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Turnover is a perennial problem in information systems (IS). Prior research into the causes of IS turnover considers only one generic type of turnover. This study, however, distinguishes job change (turnover) from occupational change (turnaway). Both job and occupational changes are quite pervasive among IS professionals with adverse consequences for organizations seeking to retain a skilled and stable IS workforce. Two major research questions are examined: Why are turnover and turnaway so high and pervasive in IS? What causes an IS professional to turnaway rather than to turnover? Separate analyses of turnover and turnaway are beneficial because the motivation for job change and occupation change may be different and occupation change can impact the IS industry as a whole more critically than a job change within the IS profession.

Much of the prior research has analyzed turnover from the perspective of the individual worker. From this perspective, psychological theories focusing on personality traits, career orientations, and motivational factors, such as job and pay satisfaction, organizational commitment, and motivating potential scores are used to explain intent to turnover (e.g., Igbaria and Greenhaus 1992; Tett and Meyer, 1993). However, turnover may also be examined from a sociological perspective such as organizational or occupational labor market structures (Doeringer and Piore 1971; Osterman 1992, 1984). From this perspective, structural explanations of turnover are based on opportunities for mobility of IS professionals across and within firms and occupations, rather than focusing on individual characteristics of any single IS professional.

In this research, the issue of turnover and turnaway from both psychological and sociological perspectives is studied. A two-phase design that combines quantitative and qualitative methods as suggested in Creswell (1994) is adopted. Phase one involved a quantitative study that examined the factors that differentiate an IS professional's intentions to turnover and to turnaway. Phase two includes in-depth interviews with IS professionals who have actually turned over and turned away to better understand the psychological and structural dynamics of job and occupational changes.

In phase one, it is hypothesized that individuals' differential levels of motivational dispositions, in particular, growth need strength (GNS) would affect their intentions to turnover or turnaway. By its nature, the IS profession is highly challenging and fast paced. Those who decide to stay with the IS profession are therefore likely to possess the motivational disposition to strive to remain current with the accelerated pace of technological developments. However, no significant differences in the level of GNS in IS professionals who intended to turnover versus turnaway were found.

The study did find that IS professionals who intend to turnaway experience significantly higher role stressors—role conflict and role ambiguity—than those who intend only to turnover. Further exploration into the significance of role stressors for turnover versus turnaway is being done in interviews with IS professionals. The preliminary findings suggest that IS professionals who turnover reduce role stressors by defining their career as one of achieve-

ment rather than advancement. In the career of achievement, success is defined in terms of skills and expertise in a specialization within the occupational community. For IS professionals who value a career of achievement but are employed by a firm that does not provide sufficient opportunities to accumulate new IS knowledge, turnover is a way to gain new skills within the IS field. In contrast, in the career of advancement, success is defined in terms of position, influence, and authority in an organization. IS professionals who turnaway value a career of advancement but find limited prospects for upward promotion as they are tied to a technical career path within their firms. These professionals reduce role stressors by leaving the IS profession and entering another profession that provides more opportunities for upward mobility.

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