

FROM REACTIVE TO CALCULATED QUILTS: ADAPTING THE UNFOLDING MODEL OF VOLUNTARY TURNOVER

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Purpose: This study assesses the adequacy of the unfolding model of voluntary turnover (UMVT) in the Polish context to propose a revised version. Addressing the wide variation in classification rates reported in previous empirical tests (12.1-92.6%), it adapts the model to the evolving conditions of the contemporary labor market.

Design/methodology/approach: A retrospective quantitative design was employed using an instrument adapted from Lee et al. (1999). Data were collected via computer-assisted personal interviewing, yielding high data quality and a response rate of 68.1%. Respondents were classified into decision paths using an algorithmic procedure based on the presence or absence of key model constructs.

Findings: The study revealed that the original UMVT had limited explanatory power of 18.1%, whereas the adapted model successfully classified 87.5% of cases. Results indicate that voluntary turnover decisions are predominantly calculated, as all resignations were preceded by job search, evaluation of alternatives, and a job offer. Additionally, specific paths were identified where employees decided to quit despite reporting high job satisfaction.

Research limitations: The study's generalizability is limited by its focus on a purposively selected, homogeneous occupational group (call center employees) within a single large organization in Poland. Additionally, the retrospective research design may introduce a risk of recall bias among respondents.

Practical implications: Retention strategies should target the extended pre-decision deliberation phase. Since high job satisfaction alone does not prevent planned turnover, organizations must monitor external labor market conditions, provide internal career development opportunities, and introduce tenure-based incentives. Furthermore, managers should be trained to proactively identify work-related shocks and initiate early retention dialogues.

Originality/value: As the first empirical test of the UMVT in the Polish context, this study contributes to turnover theory by highlighting a transition from reactive, shock-driven processes characterized by minimal mental deliberation to proactive decisions grounded in planning and active career management.

Keywords: Voluntary turnover, Unfolding model of voluntary turnover, Decision paths, Shocks, Job satisfaction.

Category of the paper: Research paper.

1. Introduction

Voluntary employee turnover remains one of the most persistent and costly challenges in contemporary human resource management. Its consequences extend far beyond the direct financial costs associated with recruitment, selection, and onboarding, encompassing losses in organizational human and social capital (Cascio, 2000). Excessive turnover disrupts work processes, erodes organizational knowledge, and weakens team cohesion, thereby adversely affecting organizational effectiveness and service quality (Abelson, Baysinger, 1984; Hancock et al., 2013). In the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, the scale of voluntary resignations intensified, a phenomenon widely referred to as the “Great Resignation”, which has renewed scholarly interest in the mechanisms underlying employee turnover (Formica, Sfodera, 2022; Serenko, 2023).

Research aimed at identifying the decision-making processes leading to voluntary job resignation has been undertaken by numerous scholars since the second half of the twentieth century (Hom et al., 2017). These efforts gave rise to several influential models of employee turnover rooted in the job dissatisfaction paradigm, conceptualizing the decision to quit as a relatively rational and sequential process typically initiated by declining job satisfaction and followed by the search for alternatives and ultimately leaving the organization (Hom et al., 2020).

A significant contribution to the development of employee turnover theory was made by Lee and Mitchell (1994), who proposed the unfolding model of voluntary turnover (UMVT), challenging the assumption that job dissatisfaction constitutes a necessary precondition for leaving an organization. The model emphasized the role of sudden events (shocks) and the reliance on pre-existing plans of action (scripts) in the decision-making process, and introduced the notion of multiple distinct decision paths leading to quitting, including those that may occur independently of job satisfaction levels.

The UMVT has been empirically tested in the United States among accountants (Lee et al., 1999), military officers (Holt et al., 2007), and IT professionals (Niederman et al., 2007), as well as in the United Kingdom among nurses (Morrell et al., 2008) and construction professionals (Jones et al., 2010). The findings of these studies revealed considerable variation in the effectiveness of classifying turnover cases into the model’s decision paths, with classification rates ranging from 12.1% (Niederman et al., 2007) to 92.6% (Lee et al., 1999). Importantly, more recent empirical investigations have tended to report lower levels of model fit and have identified additional decision-making processes extending beyond the model’s original structure.

Although the newly identified decision paths were interpreted as specific to particular occupational groups, a comparative analysis of prior empirical tests of the model suggests an alternative interpretation. The decision-making processes observed in more recent studies

(Holt et al., 2007; Niederman et al., 2007; Jones et al., 2010)—irrespective of the profession examined—demonstrated notable similarities, indicating that their occurrence may reflect broader technological, social, and economic transformations rather than merely the unique characteristics of specific occupations. From this perspective, the additional decision paths may be understood as manifestations of the adaptation of turnover mechanisms to changing organizational and labor market conditions.

The inconsistencies in prior empirical findings, combined with shifting labor market dynamics and the growing scale of voluntary resignations, underscore the need for further investigation into the decision-making processes underlying employee turnover. A particularly important yet underexplored research context concerns the countries of Central Europe. To the best of the author's knowledge, no empirical studies in Poland have to date tested the assumptions of the unfolding model. Addressing this research gap, the aim of this study is to assess the adequacy of the UMVT within a selected occupational group and, on this basis, to propose a revised version of the model that accounts for contemporary labor market conditions.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Classical approaches to employee turnover

Scholarly interest in voluntary employee turnover dates back to the second half of the twentieth century. One of the earliest formal conceptualizations was March and Simon's (1958) decision to participate model, grounded in the theory of organizational equilibrium. The authors identified two key mechanisms underlying turnover decisions: perceived desirability of movement and perceived ease of movement. Even at this early stage, the model emphasized the importance of both psychological factors, such as job satisfaction, and labor market conditions.

Subsequent approaches further developed this line of reasoning by emphasizing job satisfaction as the primary predictor of employee turnover. Price's (1977) model of turnover proposed that dissatisfaction leads to turnover primarily under conditions of high perceived opportunity. Opportunity was defined as the availability of alternative roles in the environment, including not only alternative employment but also withdrawal from the labor market and engagement in non-work activities. In turn, Mobley's (1977) process model described a sequence of stages in the decision-making process leading from dissatisfaction to actual turnover, including, among others, dissatisfaction, thoughts of quitting, evaluation and search for alternatives, intention to quit, and ultimately turnover. The extended version of the model proposed by Mobley et al. (1979) additionally incorporated individual, organizational, and labor market factors, integrating earlier perspectives into a more comprehensive framework

for explaining the turnover process. Steers and Mowday (1981) proposed a model integrating, among other elements, job expectations and values, individual and organizational characteristics, job performance, affective attitudes, non-work influences, and turnover intention. A common feature of these conceptualizations was the linear structure of the process and the dominant role attributed to job satisfaction as the primary antecedent of turnover.

2.2. An alternative approach: The unfolding model of voluntary turnover

Empirical tests of classical turnover models have confirmed the relationship between job satisfaction and turnover intention (Hom, Griffeth, 1991; Hom et al., 1992). However, they also indicated that job satisfaction does not fully explain actual voluntary turnover. The association between turnover intention and actual leaving was found to be moderate, suggesting that decisions to quit are not always a straightforward consequence of accumulating dissatisfaction and do not necessarily follow a linear progression (Blau, 1993). These limitations prompted the search for alternative theoretical approaches that would account for the role of initiating events and the heterogeneity of decision-making processes. In this context, Lee and Mitchell (1994) proposed the UMVT, introducing—among other constructs—the concept of a shock initiating the turnover process and the enactment of a pre-existing plan of action, known as a script.

The UMVT is grounded in image theory, originally formulated by Beach (1993) and subsequently refined in later publications (Beach, Connolly, 2005; Beach, Mitchell, 2014). In contrast to normative decision-making models based on utility maximization, image theory assumes that individuals make decisions primarily by evaluating the compatibility of a contemplated action with their internal images of values, goals, and action plans. A central mechanism of the theory is the compatibility test, through which alternatives that conflict with these images are eliminated without the need for extensive cost–benefit analysis. This perspective made it possible to interpret decisions to leave an organization not only as a consequence of accumulating dissatisfaction, but also as a response to events that violate an individual's core images.

The assumption of the UMVT is that multiple distinct decision paths may lead to voluntary turnover. These paths differ, among others, in the role attributed to job satisfaction, the significance of shocks, the presence or absence of alternative employment opportunities, as well as the speed and degree of deliberation involved in the decision-making process. The model thus enables the explanation of both turnover preceded by prolonged consideration of available options and decisions made relatively quickly in response to specific organizational or non-work events.

In the original version of the model, Lee and Mitchell (1994) identified four distinct decision paths leading to voluntary turnover. Three of these paths (Paths 1-3) are initiated by a shock, defined as a specific event that captures attention and prompts reflection on continued employment. A shock may be personal or organizational in nature and may carry a positive,

neutral, or negative valence; it may also be expected or unexpected. Its significance lies not in directly determining turnover, but in triggering the decision-making process.

Path 1 assumes that following the occurrence of a shock, an almost automatic decision is made on the basis of a previously formed script. The decision is reached without in-depth analysis of the situation and without searching for alternatives, as the individual has previously adopted the principle that employment should be terminated under particular circumstances. Path 2 is also triggered by a shock; however, instead of activating a script, the event results in a perceived incompatibility with the individual's values, goals, or strategies (image violation). Consequently, the individual decides to quit without searching for or evaluating alternative employment opportunities. Path 3 is likewise initiated by a shock that produces image violations; however, in this instance, this sequence leads to dissatisfaction, triggering the search for and evaluation of alternative employment opportunities. Path 4 reflects the classical dissatisfaction paradigm, as the process begins with gradually increasing job dissatisfaction. This path may take two variants: dissatisfaction may lead to the consideration, search, and evaluation of alternative employment opportunities prior to making a final decision (4B), or the decision to quit may be made without prior search for alternatives (4A).

2.3. Empirical tests and model extensions

The first empirical test, involving nurses (Lee et al., 1996), employed retrospective interviews to classify turnover cases. While findings confirmed the occurrence of the previously proposed decision paths, including shock-initiated processes, the qualitative analysis revealed conceptual ambiguities and difficulties in classifying certain cases. Consequently, the next stage of development involved a quantitative replication among accountants (Lee et al., 1999), which refined the operationalization of key constructs—shock, engaged script, image violation, satisfaction, search and/or evaluation of alternatives, likely offer—and introduced a formalized classification procedure.

Empirical tests of the UMVT reveal varying classification rates across occupational groups, indicating that decision-making processes may extend beyond its original structure. While high rates were achieved for accountants (92.6%; Lee et al., 1999) and UK nurses (77.0%; Morrell et al., 2008), the model showed moderate fit for military officers (47.3%; Holt et al., 2007) and limited applicability for IT (12.1%; Niederman et al., 2007) and construction professionals (19.2%; Jones et al., 2010).

In the study of IT professionals, additional Paths 1a, 1b, and 4c were proposed (Niederman et al., 2007). All three involved the enactment of a script centered on searching for and evaluating alternatives and holding a job offer prior to turnover, differing in the configuration of shock, image violation, and job satisfaction. Path 1a assumed a negative shock accompanied by image violation and low job satisfaction; Path 1b involved a positive shock with sustained job satisfaction and no image violation; and Path 4c reflected gradually increasing dissatisfaction accompanied by image violation in the absence of a shock.

In the study of construction professionals, the presence of Paths 1a, 1b, and 4c was confirmed, and additional Paths PP6 and PP7 were proposed (Jones et al., 2010). Both involved the occurrence of a shock, the enactment of a script, the search and evaluation of alternatives, and the likely offer. However, they differed in the configuration of image violation and job satisfaction: in Path PP6, low job satisfaction occurred without image violation, whereas in PP7 image violation was present despite sustained job satisfaction. In the study of military officers (Holt et al., 2007), new decision paths were also identified, and the need to modify the model was emphasized, highlighting the limited adequacy of its original structure under conditions of strong institutional constraints.

In all of the empirical studies cited above that tested the UMVT, the questionnaire and classification procedures developed by Lee et al. (1999) were employed, which enable direct comparison of the reported results. Nevertheless, some studies sought to identify decision paths using alternative methodological approaches. These included the use of different sets of survey questions (Donnelly, Quirin, 2006; Shipp et al., 2014), as well as data derived from exit interviews (Kulik et al., 2012).

3. Hypotheses development

This study assesses the adequacy of the UMVT within a selected occupational group in Poland and, on this basis, proposes potential modifications to the model. It is assumed that the key constructs of the decision-making process—shock, engaged script, image violation, satisfaction, search and/or evaluation of alternatives, likely offer, and the varying temporal dynamics of individual paths—constitute essential components of voluntary turnover decisions.

Previous empirical tests of the model have yielded highly differentiated classification rates across the five original decision paths ranging from 12.1% (Niederman et al., 2007) to 92.6% (Lee et al., 1999), with lower levels of fit more frequently observed in more recent studies. This pattern may suggest that dynamic technological, social, and economic transformations have altered the structure of decision-making processes leading to voluntary turnover. Accordingly, Hypothesis 1 is proposed:

H1: The original UMVT provides a limited explanation of the decision-making processes underlying contemporary voluntary turnover among call center employees in Poland.

Although the UMVT identifies five primary decision-making processes, its theoretical structure allows for the distinction of a greater number of paths. Empirical studies have confirmed the occurrence of additional, recurring paths, including, among others, 1a, 1b, 4c, 5a, and 5b. Based on the analysis of prior empirical tests of the model, Hypothesis 2 was formulated as follows:

H2: Two original Paths 3 and 4b, combined with three Paths 1a, 1b, and 4c identified by Niederman et al., provide a more comprehensive explanation of the turnover decision-making processes among Polish call center employees than the five original paths.

Contemporary career concepts – such as the boundaryless (Sullivan, Arthur, 2006), protean (Hall, 2004), intelligent (Arthur et al., 1995), and spiral career (Brousseau et al., 1996) – emphasize individual responsibility for professional development and deliberate interorganizational mobility. Leaving an organization may therefore constitute an element of a planned career scenario, even in the presence of sustained high job satisfaction. Accordingly, Hypothesis 3 was formulated as follows:

H3: Among call center employees, decision paths exist that comprise job search and/or evaluation of alternatives and a job offer, occurring along with high job satisfaction.

Concurrently, economic conditions in Poland – including relatively low wage levels, limited household savings, and a high share of household debt (Statistics Poland, 2020a) – may encourage employees to decide to change employers only after obtaining an alternative job offer. Consequently, a limited occurrence can be expected of decision paths characterized by a minimal or moderate scope of deliberation and the absence of a job offer in hand, such as Paths 1, 2, and 4a. On this basis, Hypothesis 4 was formulated as follows:

H4: The three original UMVT Paths 1, 2, and 4a occur sporadically or not at all among call center employees.

4. Methods

4.1. Sample selection and research context

The selection of the study population was purposive and conducted in two stages: first, the organization was chosen, followed by the occupational group. The study was conducted in a large organization particularly exposed to excessive voluntary turnover and within a homogeneous occupational group that had not previously been used to verify the assumptions of the UMVT, characterized by both high voluntary turnover and strategic importance to the organization.

The enterprise selection criteria were established based on data from Statistics Poland, using a dynamic analysis covering the years 2010-2019 and a static analysis for 2019, focusing on employee-initiated terminations and the unemployment rate. The analysis revealed more than a twofold increase in employee-initiated terminations during the examined period (Statistics Poland, 2011-2020). Concurrently, their share of total terminations increased from 9-10% in 2010-2013 to 15% in 2018-2019, accompanied by a decline in the proportion of employer-initiated terminations (Statistics Poland, 2011-2020).

A very strong negative correlation ($r = -0.97$) was identified between the registered unemployment rate and the employee-initiated termination rate (Statistics Poland, 2011-2020). This indicates that the intensity of voluntary turnover increases as labor market conditions improve. This relationship is consistent with the literature, which suggests that the relative ease of obtaining alternative employment enhances employees' propensity to leave (Ehrenberg, Smith, 2012), and that the unemployment rate is considered one of the most robust single predictors of employee turnover (March, Simon, 1958). Consequently, the selection of the research site was restricted to voivodeships characterized by relatively low unemployment rates (below 5.5%).

An analysis of variation in employee-initiated termination rates across sections of the Polish Classification of Activities (PKD, 2007), corresponding to NACE Rev. 2, in 2019 revealed significant differences between types of economic activity (ranging from 0.8% to 7.1%). The highest values were recorded in the following sections: Information and Communication (7.1%), Financial and Insurance Activities (5.2%), Professional, Scientific and Technical Activities (5.1%), and Accommodation and Food Service Activities (4.9%). Moreover, the intensity of employee-initiated terminations was markedly higher in the private sector than in the public sector (Statistics Poland, 2011-2020).

Based on the conducted analysis, it was determined that the study would cover a private sector enterprise whose main activity falls within one of the four PKD sections characterized by the highest employee-initiated termination rates and which is located in a voivodeship with an unemployment rate below 5.5%. In the second stage, the selection of the occupational group was based on two criteria: its classification as a shortage occupation in the given location, verified based on the Occupational Barometer 2020 (Regional Labor Office in Krakow, 2019), and its strategic importance to the enterprise.

4.2. Research instrument and classification rules

The research instrument was developed based on the questionnaire used in the first quantitative empirical test of the UMT (Lee et al., 1999). The study employed a version adapted to the Polish context, while preserving the logic of the decision-process classification proposed by Lee et al. (1999). Certain items of the questionnaire were modified to reflect the specific conditions of the Polish labor market, enhance measurement precision, incorporate the results of the pilot study, and accommodate a different data collection technique.

Given the retrospective nature of the study, screening questions were applied. Individuals who declared that they did not accurately recall the circumstances and reasons for quitting their job were excluded from the study to minimize post hoc attribution bias and memory distortions (Huber, Power, 1985; Miller et al., 1997).

The classification of respondents into specific decision paths was conducted algorithmically, based on the criteria defined by Lee et al. (1999). The procedure involved binary coding of the presence (1) or absence (0) of key model constructs: shock, engaged script,

image violation, satisfaction, search and/or evaluation of alternatives, and likely offer. For example, the occurrence of a shock was identified based on an affirmative response regarding a specific event that triggered thoughts of quitting, its description in an open-ended question, or confirmation of having received an unexpected job offer. Depending on the configuration of these constructs, cases were classified into particular decision processes (both original and empirically identified in the course of the study). This approach ensured the comparability of the findings with earlier tests of the model while simultaneously enhancing measurement validity within the studied context.

4.3. Data collection procedure

The study employed computer-assisted personal interviewing (CAPI), whereas earlier empirical tests of the UMVT relied primarily on self-administered modes, such as mail or online surveys. This choice was motivated by concerns about data quality. Compared with self-administered techniques, interviewer-administered CAPI offers greater control over the measurement process, including the ability to resolve queries and clarify ambiguities during the interview, achieve higher response and completion rates, and allow the interviewer to identify imprecise or internally inconsistent answers (Groves et al., 2009).

Research procedures adhered to ethical standards for research involving human participants. Formal approval was granted by the participating organization's management, and the data collection process complied with GDPR regulations. Prior to the interview, all participants were informed about the study's purpose and assured of full anonymity and confidentiality. Participation was voluntary, and respondents provided informed consent by agreeing to take part in the computer-assisted interview.

Ultimately, a response rate of 68.1% was achieved, which constitutes a notable methodological strength compared with the reference studies, which reported substantially lower rates ranging from 10.6% (Niederman et al., 2007) to 38.9% (Holt et al., 2007). This high level was largely attributable to the data collection mode employed and to managerial support for the study, evidenced by, for instance, permission to conduct interviews during working hours and provision of dedicated space for interviews.

5. Results

5.1. Characteristics of the research group

The study was conducted in a commercial bank with its Operations Center located in Łódź. The organization met the pre-established selection criteria regarding ownership sector (private sector), type of economic activity (Financial and Insurance Activities), and location in

a voivodeship with a relatively low unemployment rate (Łódź Voivodeship – 5.4% in December 2019; Statistics Poland, 2020b).

The homogeneous occupational group consisted of call center employees, a sample not previously used in empirical verifications of the model. According to the Occupational Barometer 2020, telephone and electronic customer service clerks were classified as a shortage occupation in the Łódź Voivodeship in 2019 (Regional Labor Office in Krakow, 2019). The study participants consisted of current employees who had voluntarily resigned from their previous employment within the last four years.

A total of 160 employees from an internal call center participated in the study, representing primarily the debt collection department (62.5%) and the customer service department (35.0%). The sample was predominantly female (86.3%). The largest age group comprised participants aged 31-35 (44.4%), followed by those aged 36-40 (28.8%) and 26-30 (25.6%). All participants held a university degree. The average tenure in the organization prior to voluntary turnover was 3.71 years.

5.2. Testing the UMVT and its adaptation

The results indicate that the structural components of the UMVT are present in the decision-making processes of the studied group. Specifically, 43.1% of respondents experienced a shock, 76.9% engaged a script, 86.9% reported image violation, and 90.6% indicated low job satisfaction. Notably, all participants reported searching and/or evaluating alternatives and possessing a job offer.

Classification of respondents into the five original decision paths of Lee and Mitchell's model revealed that 18.1% of cases were assigned to Path 3 (7.5%) and Path 4b (10.6%), whereas Paths 1, 2, and 4a were not observed. This outcome simultaneously supports Hypotheses 1 and 4. However, including the additional paths identified in subsequent studies (1a, 1b, 4c) significantly improved the model's classification accuracy. A total of 87.5% of respondents were assigned to Paths 3, 4b, 1a, 1b, and 4c, which supports Hypothesis 2.

In the studied sample, Paths 1b and PP7 were identified, in which the decision to quit was made despite sustained high job satisfaction, accompanied by search and/or evaluation of alternatives and having a job offer in hand. This finding supports Hypothesis 3. Consequently, the results justify modifying the UMVT. The proposed adaptation includes Paths 1a, 1b, 3, 4b, and 4c—specifically, the decision processes that achieved significant empirical share and exceeded the adopted classification threshold ($\geq 5\%$). Figure 1 illustrates the adapted model.

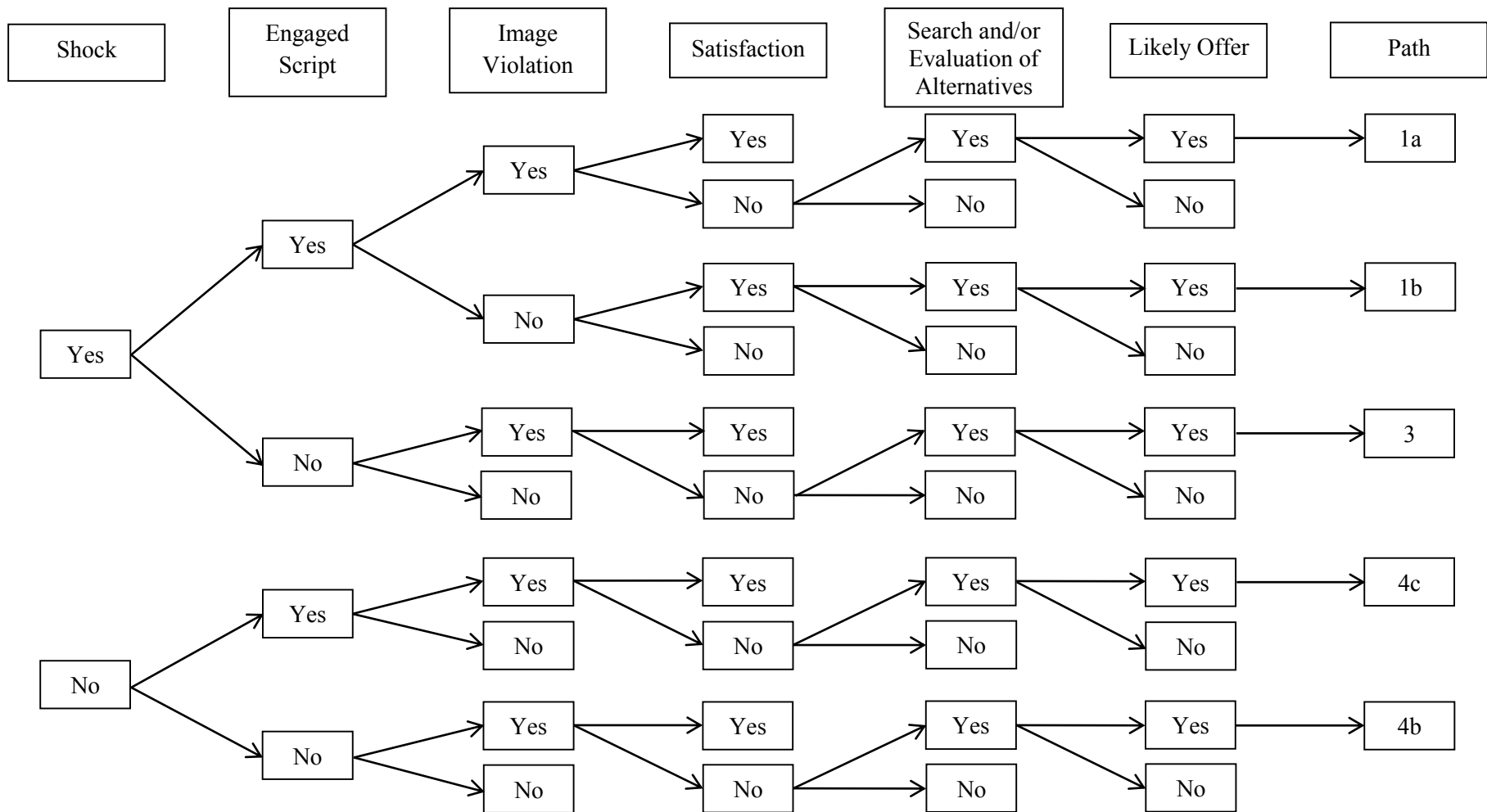


Figure 1. Adaptation of the unfolding model of voluntary turnover to the current conditions of the Polish labor market.

Source(s): Adapted from Lee et al. (1999) and author's own research.

To contextualize the findings, the classification rates observed among call center employees were compared with results from prior empirical tests of the UMVT, covering both its original and adapted forms. In the present study, the classification rate for the five original paths was 18.1%, whereas it increased to 87.5% for the adapted version. Applying the adapted model structure to previous datasets yielded similarly substantial improvements: for Holt et al. (2007), the rate rose from 47.3% to 78.6%; for Niederman et al. (2007), from 12.1% to 79.8%; and for Jones et al. (2010), from 19.2% to 76.9%, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1.

Comparison of classification rates for the original and adapted versions of the UMVT across selected empirical studies

Path	Lee et al. (1999)	Holt et al. (2007)	Niederman et al. (2007)	Morrell et al. (2008)	Jones et al. (2010)	Present study
Original version of UMVT						
1	6 (2.6%)	6 (7.0%)	0 (0%)	2 (0.6%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
2	7 (3.1%)	1 (1.2%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	1 (1.0%)	0 (0%)
3	136 (59.4%)	46 (25.3%)	6 (4.8%)	115 (32.7%)	5 (4.8%)	12 (7.5%)
4a	8 (3.5%)	1 (1.2%)	0 (0%)	1 (0.3%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
4b	55 (24.0%)	32 (37.2%)	9 (7.3%)	153 (43.5%)	14 (13.5%)	17 (10.6%)
Classification rate	212 (92.6%)	86 (47.3%)	15 (12.1%)	271 (77.0%)	20 (19.2%)	29 (18.1%)
Adapted version of UMVT						
1a	n.a.	46 (25.3%)	55 (44.4%)	n.a.	42 (40.4%)	30 (18.8%)
1b	n.a.	19 (10.4%)	10 (8.1%)	n.a.	5 (4.8%)	8 (5.0%)
3	136 (59.4%)	46 (25.3%)	6 (4.8%)	115 (32.7%)	5 (4.8%)	12 (7.5%)
4b	55 (24.0%)	32 (37.2%)	9 (7.3%)	153 (43.5%)	14 (13.5%)	17 (10.6%)
4c	n.a.	n.a.	19 (15.3%)	n.a.	14 (13.5%)	73 (45.6%)
Classification rate	191 (83.4%)	143 (78.6%)	99 (79.8%)	268 (76.1%)	80 (76.9%)	140 (87.5%)

Sources: Own elaboration based on Lee et al. (1999); Holt et al. (2007); Niederman et al. (2007); Morrell et al. (2008); Jones et al. (2010), and the present study.

5.3. Duration of decision paths

The analysis of the duration of voluntary turnover processes revealed that the mean length of the overall process was 7.2 months. The first period (deliberation), covering the time from the first thoughts of quitting to the decision to leave, lasted on average 5.3 months, whereas the second period (implementation)—from the decision to leave to actual quitting—lasted 1.9 months. Differences in process duration were also observed across decision paths. The longest mean duration was found for Path PP7 (8.3 months), while the shortest was observed for Path 3b (5.6 months). These results indicate that voluntary turnover is a gradual

process, characterized by a significantly longer period of deliberation compared to implementation.

6. Discussion

The path classification results observed in this research are most comparable to those reported by Niederman et al. (2007). In both studies, the classification rate for the five original paths of the UMVT was low (18.1% and 12.1%, respectively), with respondents assigned to only two decision processes—Paths 3 and 4b (7.5% vs. 10.6% and 4.8% vs. 7.3%, respectively). Concurrently, in both the present study and the analysis by Niederman et al. (2007), Paths 1a and 4c were dominant (18.8% vs. 45.6% and 44.4% vs. 15.3%, respectively).

The study of call center employees is distinguished from previous research by the universal presence of search and/or evaluation and job offer constructs across all identified decision paths. This pattern may be attributed to the lower level of affluence in Polish society compared with the United States and the United Kingdom, where this type of research has predominantly been conducted to date. Employees may be less able to afford frictional unemployment; consequently, quitting decisions tend to be more calculated and are typically preceded by securing an alternative employment option. Unlike the rapid, automatic decision-making typical of Path 1, the patterns observed in this study point to an extended deliberation process where individuals minimize economic risk. The results reveal a fundamental transition from reactive, shock-driven processes to proactive decisions grounded in planning and active career management.

The adapted version of the model, comprising Paths 1a, 1b, 3, 4b, and 4c, yields substantially higher classification rates not only in the present study (87.5% instead of 18.1%) but also when applied to data reported by Holt et al. (2007), Niederman et al. (2007), and Jones et al. (2010). This indicates that the proposed adaptation demonstrates greater empirical stability across different occupational groups and varying labor market conditions.

In interpreting the findings, it is also beneficial to draw on the stream of research on job embeddedness, which emphasizes the employee's enmeshment in the organization as a factor that constrains their propensity to leave. Recent empirical studies indicate a significant negative relationship between embeddedness and turnover intention, while simultaneously highlighting the context-dependent nature of this association (e.g., Sahoo et al., 2024; Kiazad et al., 2024). However, Peltokorpi and Allen (2024) suggest that even strong on-the-job embeddedness does not preclude turnover decisions when employees identify attractive external alternatives. The present findings align with these insights: in the analysed sample, even respondents reporting high job satisfaction (Paths 1b and PP7) engaged in job search behaviors and decided to change employment upon securing a favourable offer. This implies that organizational

embeddedness and high job satisfaction do not eliminate planned career mobility; instead, they serve as a stable foundation from which employees proactively manage their careers when superior alternatives arise.

It is worth emphasizing that the UMVT remains the subject of ongoing analyses and theoretical development. Evaluating the model, Kim (2025) points to its enduring value as a framework for explaining voluntary turnover processes, while also underscoring the need for empirical tests across diverse occupational contexts. In parallel, research is refining our understanding of the shock mechanism, suggesting that quitting decisions may result not only from directly experiencing an event but also from anticipating it (Liu et al., 2025). Moreover, recent work has sought to integrate the UMVT with other theoretical perspectives, including a temporal approach to job embeddedness (Tipirneni, 2024), indicating that the UMVT is not a closed concept but continues to evolve in response to changing labor-market conditions and emerging research questions.

6.1. Practical implications

The results have significant implications for human resource management practice. The average duration of the voluntary turnover process (7.2 months) offers organizations a real opportunity to implement retention strategies. However, its internal structure is critical: the deliberation period (averaging 5.3 months) is significantly longer than the implementation period (1.9 months). Consequently, retention management efforts should focus on the pre-decision period, as the scope for effective organizational intervention appears limited thereafter.

The findings confirm that turnover decisions are not determined solely by job dissatisfaction, as assumed by most classical models. Instead, the process may be initiated by a shock or result from the enactment of a preexisting script. In some cases, the decision to quit was made despite high job satisfaction (Paths 1b and PP7), indicating the growing importance of planned career mobility. Contemporary turnover scripts encompass both transitions to organizations offering superior working and pay conditions and leaving after a predetermined period, representing a planned stage in an individual's career.

From a managerial perspective, this implies that reducing turnover cannot rely solely on increasing job satisfaction. Monitoring external factors becomes essential, particularly the unemployment rate and employment conditions offered by competitors. At the same time, greater emphasis should be placed on creating internal career development opportunities and tenure-based incentives (e.g., seniority bonuses) that may offer an alternative to enacting a turnover script. Targeted actions are particularly relevant for employees who report high job satisfaction yet actively monitor the labor market or are pursuing a planned career stage.

Moreover, the significant proportion of shock-initiated processes (43%) suggests the need to develop organizational mechanisms for the early identification of events, particularly work-related ones, such as organizational changes, missed promotions, or modifications to job responsibilities. Enhancing managerial awareness in recognizing such situations and

developing skills in conducting retention dialogues at the early stage of the turnover decision-making process may increase the chances of effective intervention before the resignation is formalized.

6.2. Limitations and future research

Due to certain methodological limitations, the results should be interpreted with caution. The study was conducted on a purposively selected, homogeneous occupational group employed within a single large organization in Poland, which limits the generalizability of the findings to other professions and countries. Additionally, the retrospective nature of the study may have entailed a risk of recall bias among respondents.

Future research should examine whether the proposed adapted version of the model retains its greater explanatory power in other occupational groups, particularly within roles of strategic importance to organizations. A further promising avenue is the in-depth identification of the specific scripts employees enact, as well as the scope and frequency of labor market monitoring preceding the emergence of thoughts about quitting. In this context, particular attention should be paid to the impact of AI advancement and task automation, which may reshape job content and generate new, as yet undocumented turnover scripts.

7. Summary

The study aimed to assess the adequacy of the UMVT within a selected occupational group in the Polish context and to modify the model where necessary. The findings indicate that leaving an organization results from diverse decision-making processes based on distinct configurations of the following constructs: shock, engaged script, image violation, satisfaction, search and/or evaluation of alternatives, and a likely offer. While the UMVT remains a fundamentally useful analytical framework with empirically supported core constructs, its original five-path version demonstrates limited explanatory power among the studied call center employees (18.1%).

Consequently, the first empirical test of the UMVT in Poland and a comparative analysis of prior related studies enabled the successful adaptation of its original version to the current situation in the labor market. The revised model, comprising Paths 1a, 1b, 3, 4b, and 4c, allows for the classification of the vast majority of cases (87.5%) and better reflects the actual course of voluntary turnover processes. Ultimately, this updated framework contributes to the turnover literature by highlighting a shift toward planned and controlled career mobility, while simultaneously providing a practical tool to support modern employee retention management practices.

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