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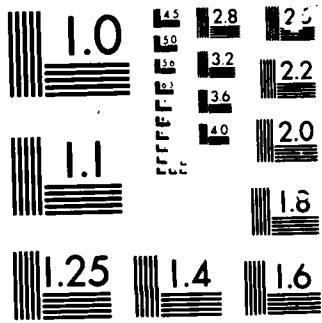
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TURNOVER RESEARCH FOR AIR FORCE POLICY

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HUMAN RESOURCES

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<p>Recent research under the auspices of the Air Force Human Resources Laboratory (AFHRL) has identified factors influencing turnover intent and behavior of first- and second-term enlisted personnel in eight occupational specialties. Implications for Air Force policy of the results obtained are the topic of this paper. The results are striking and have clear policy implications. Relatively few factors consistently accounted for up to 68% of the variance in turnover and related outcomes, an accomplishment unparalleled in the literature. Results generalized across occupations, and were stable upon cross-validation. All but one of the factors identified are under management control. Thus, they lend themselves to remedial action. Each factor is discussed from the perspective of what actions management might take to induce valued airmen to remain in the Air Force. As a general rule, enhancing commitment appears to be more critical than increasing compensation as a managerial intervention strategy.</p>			
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IMPLICATIONS OF THE RESULTS OF RECENT
TURNOVER RESEARCH FOR AIR FORCE POLICY

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SUMMARY

This paper discusses the implications of recent turnover research which identified a small, manageable set of factors having a strong impact on the turnover intent and behavior of Air Force enlisted personnel in eight occupations or Air Force specialties (AFSs). All but one of the factors identified is under direct or indirect management control. A major finding of the study is that Commitment to the Air Force has a strong indirect impact on the stay/leave behavior of the airmen studied. Thus, in this paper, the implication that managers should cultivate commitment is stressed, followed by a discussion of actions managers might take to enhance commitment and increase the likelihood that valued airmen will remain in the Air Force. The following factors, which on the basis of this research are primary candidates for remedial action, are discussed: Desirability of Alternatives, Critical Events, Intrinsic Satisfaction, Importance of Air Force Benefits, Impact of Others on Career Decisions, Sensitivity to Bonus Policy Adjustment, and Satisfaction with Assignments.

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IMPLICATIONS OF THE RESULTS OF RECENT TURNOVER RESEARCH FOR AIR FORCE POLICY

Turnover is a costly outcome for organizations. Thus, employers are often concerned about keeping valued employees in whom they have invested considerable resources. Unfortunately, until recently, too little has been known about the factors influencing turnover decisions, especially those of a perceptual nature. To improve upon this situation, the present investigators developed, empirically validated, and tested an advanced, hybrid model of turnover on a worldwide sample of 3,998 first- and second-term enlisted personnel in eight occupational specialties. Detailed explication of this research is provided by Watson (1985), Watson, Appel, and Brown (in review), and Watson, Appel, and Black (in review). The present paper focuses upon the practical implications¹ deriving from a model of turnover which emerged, called the Phase III Model.

The Basis for the Implications Offered

The Phase III Model, which serves as the basis for the implications, is represented in Figure 1. In the investigation referenced above, predictors in this model were so strong that together, they typically accounted for between 50% and 68% of the variance in each of four criteria. Further, the results held up remarkably well upon cross-validation. Shrinkage was usually less than .05. In addition, the findings appear to be generalizable for two reasons. First, the results were quite consistent across the eight Air Force specialties (AFSs) examined. Second, demographic variables did not serve as potent moderators, producing differential outcomes. Thus, the results obtained could be represented by a single Phase III Model (Figure 1). The simplicity of this model is dramatic. A relatively small subset of variables from an earlier, more complex model emerged as potent predictors of the first intermediate criterion. Predictors were retained in the Phase III model if they were statistically significant ($p < .05$), and if they contributed at least .02 to the increment in explained variance. Looking at the model in a time-sequenced fashion, moving from left to right, note that progressively fewer variables predict subsequent intermediate or final criteria. Of all the initial predictors in the model, only Availability of Alternatives is not under direct or indirect management control. All of the remaining predictors can be influenced by management and are directly predictive of the first intermediate outcome, Commitment to the Air Force. This construct turned out to be an extremely important criterion variable since it proved to be a direct determinant of Thoughts of Leaving and Search and of Propensity to Stay. Airmen who scored high on Commitment to the Air Force tended not to think about leaving and tended not to engage in search behavior. They also expressed a stronger propensity to stay in the Air Force than did their counterparts who scored low on this criterion. Although Commitment to the Air Force was not directly related to the behavioral Stay/Leave criterion, it was indirectly related to this final outcome through the more proximate criterion, Propensity to Stay. Since Commitment to the Air Force was demonstrated to have such a strong and almost exclusive impact on later outcomes in the stay/leave decision process, the present authors assert that it should be cultivated to induce valued airmen to remain in the Air Force. Fortunately, the research conducted provides insights into how this might be accomplished. Below, the implication that managers should foster commitment is elaborated upon, followed by a discussion of specific actions management might take to enhance commitment. This discussion focuses upon the predictors on the left side of the model which influenced Commitment to the Air Force.

¹The views expressed here are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the United States Air Force or the Department of Defense.

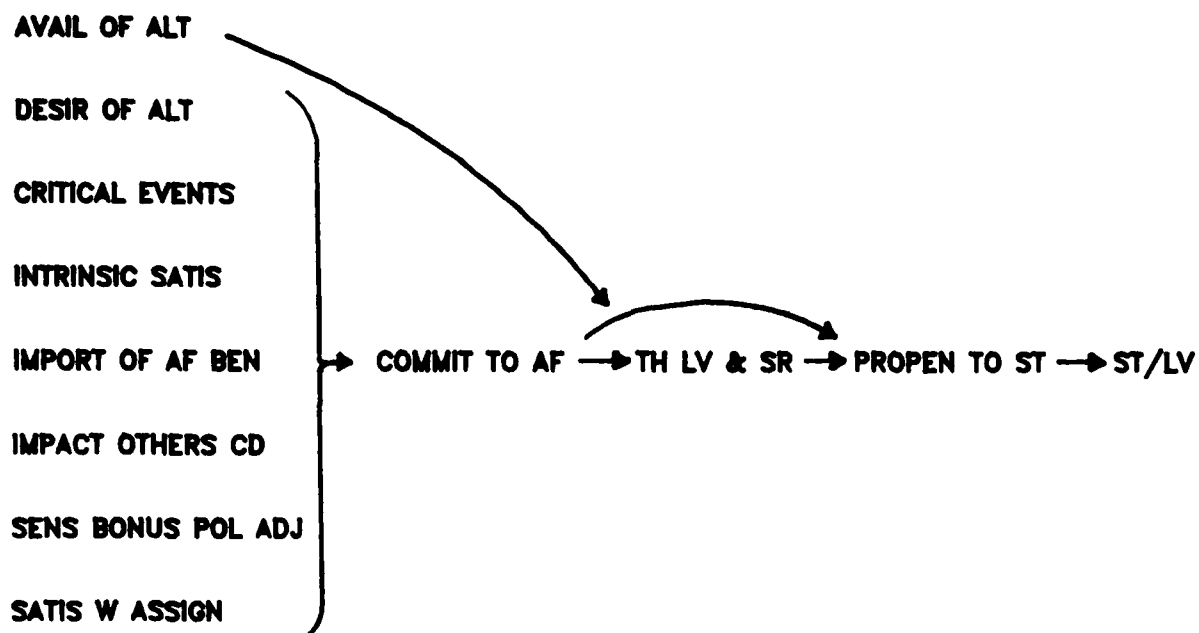


Figure 1. The Phase III Model Upon Which Implications Are Based.

Implications

From the large data base produced in the investigation upon which this paper is based, a major Air Force policy implication emerged. This implication is as follows: As a managerial strategy, increasing commitment may be as important as maintaining an adequate level of compensation. Although adequate, equitable compensation must be maintained, the data point to the fact that Air Force enlisted personnel are very likely to respond to reenlistment efforts appealing to their sense of commitment to the Air Force as an institution and as a way of life. This is consonant with the argument by Moskos (1976) a decade ago that an institutional orientation among service members should be developed. Given the results of the current investigation, the issue becomes a question of how commitment to the Air Force might be enhanced. The emphasis on a commitment-oriented strategy contrasts somewhat with current Air Force practice, despite interest among Air Force managers in Moskos' institutional versus occupational distinction. Certain aspects of compensation obviously influence retention. For instance, 87% and 76% of the respondents studied, respectively, indicated that pay/allowances and bonuses were either very important or somewhat important in influencing their decision to stay or leave. Understanding the importance of compensation, Air Force managers have emphasized factors such as pay and bonuses, the latter fluctuating with cyclical changes in the economy. Unfortunately, if pecuniary factors are given too much emphasis, recruits may be attracted or incumbents may be developed who are more interested in what they can get from the Air Force than in what they can give to it. Thus, on the basis of their research findings, the current investigators conclude that although adequate compensation must be maintained, this economic emphasis should be augmented by a psychological thrust aimed at cultivating Commitment to the Air Force.

To cultivate commitment, policy makers need to take remedial action with regard to the following predictors: Desirability of Alternatives, Critical Events, Intrinsic Satisfaction, Importance of Air Force Benefits, Impact of Others on Career Decisions, Sensitivity to Bonus

Policy Adjustment, and Satisfaction with Assignments. Examples of how each factor can be given increased managerial emphasis are discussed below.

Desirability of Alternatives (DA). It is evident that many enlisted personnel perceive there to be desirable career alternatives to continuing in the Air Force. To counter these perceptions, the Air Force needs to increase its own perceived desirability. To accomplish this, Air Force managers need to become more familiar with personnel policies of the best civilian firms. They could then alter Air Force policies, within sometimes unavoidable constraints, to become more competitive with the best civilian firms. Once the Air Force is made a better place for a career, the assets of such a career will need to be marketed more aggressively to potential recruits and to Air Force members.

Critical Events (CE). Critical events are events which stand out in an airman's recollection as having either a particularly positive or negative impact on the decision to stay or leave. The critical events examined in this study are listed below in descending order of their influence. Where the direction of influence is not intuitively obvious, it is indicated in parentheses. Critical events are: (a) getting a promotion, (b) increase in pay, (c) a good performance appraisal, (d) an offer/advertisement from a civilian firm, (e) not getting a promotion, (f) a decrease in pay, (g) a poor performance appraisal, (h) a conflict with spouse's job, (i) a change in supervisor (stay), and (j) a change in co-workers (stay). It should be noted that although CE was a strong predictor of Commitment to the Air Force, such events were acknowledged to have an impact on the stay/leave decisions of less than half of the participants in the study.

Intrinsic Satisfaction (IS). The fact that IS was an important determinant of Commitment to the Air Force suggests that strategies which promote IS would increase retention and reduce the need to rely so heavily upon extrinsic motivators. Managers at the Air Force Military Personnel Center (AFMPC), and at the Leadership and Management Development Center (LMDC), have already made great strides in this area. One additional action that can be taken is to redesign jobs to increase the intrinsic value of work (see Watson & Zumbro, 1977). Consonant with efforts to redesign jobs, the current national awareness of the characteristics of excellent corporations (see Peters & Waterman, 1982) underscores the need to provide personnel with autonomy and opportunities for innovation, even within highly structured, bureaucratic organizations. Doing so should enhance IS among Air Force personnel.

Importance of Air Force Benefits (IAFB). Air Force managers have long been aware of the importance of benefits, some of which are unique to the Air Force. They should certainly continue their efforts to prevent the erosion of these benefits. The benefits identified in this study, in descending order of their importance to the respondents queried, are as follows: (a) medical/dental care, (b) job security, (c) off-duty education, (d) leave policies, (e) bonuses, (f) commissary/exchange privileges, (g) early retirement opportunities, (h) travel opportunities, (i) morale, recreation, and welfare facilities, and (j) commissioning programs for airmen.

Impact of Others on Career Decisions (IOCD). The strong influence of family and friends upon stay/leave decisions suggests that organizational socialization begins prior to Air Force entry. It also suggests that Air Force members continue to be influenced by important people in the external environment once they are on the job. Therefore, the Air Force could make special efforts to recruit personnel with Air Force or other military backgrounds since they would be familiar with expectations and would have family and friends who tend to favor military service.

The Air Force has demonstrated a concern for the perceptions and well-being of military family members. Action should continue to be taken to monitor and improve spouse satisfaction with the Air Force. Besides monitoring spousal attitudes, the Air Force could increase their efforts to aggressively market the Air Force way of life to family members. To the maximum

extent possible, Air Force managers should develop policies which are sensitive to the independent career aspirations of spouses. The situation faced by couples who are both service members, addressed under the Join-Spouse Program, is a special case which needs continued attention. Efforts to co-locate military spouses whenever possible should be supported. In addition, initiatives to further reduce the frequency of Permanent Change of Station (PCS) moves should be considered.

Sensitivity to Bonus Policy Adjustment (SBPA). The Air Force's policy of providing bonuses in response to supply and demand factors may not be ultimately achieving the desired results. This strategy, and the cyclical nature of the economy, result in bonuses being given at one reenlistment point and taken away at the next. The results of this study indicate that reenlistment bonus reductions due to cyclical economic changes produce frustration and resentment, which increase the desire to leave when opportunity permits. Ideally, bonuses should be given to individuals based on merit. If bonuses are provided across AFSs in response to factors irrelevant to performance, such as variations in supply and demand, they should at least be as stable as possible.

Satisfaction with Assignments (SA). For many years, much management attention has been devoted to developing and refining an equitable assignment system that can accommodate the large number of actions occurring each year. Innovative solutions to assignment system shortcomings should be considered. For instance, a computerized assignment system could be integrated with a sophisticated career management system such as the one currently used by International Business Machines (IBM) and other respected civilian corporations.

Summary

It is fortuitous that the results of the extensive retention study carried out by the investigators and their colleagues (Watson, 1985; Watson, Appel, & Black, in review; Watson, Appel, & Brown, in review) resulted in outcomes which lend themselves relatively easily to corrective actions. The investigators have stressed the important central finding that Commitment to the Air Force is a particularly important factor which should be cultivated. The investigators have identified factors influencing commitment which indirectly influence decisions to stay or leave. Illustrative suggestions for change have been offered which should stimulate readers to consider these and other strategies to improve the probability of retaining valued personnel.

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