

Explaining intra-organisational mobility: Does job embeddedness apply?

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Our research aims to understand whether job embeddedness theory can explain intra-organisational mobility, given the robust literature linking embeddedness with extra-organisational mobility. The study uses surveys from over 2,700 employees at a large healthcare organisation and structural equation modelling to investigate whether links, fit, and sacrifice can explain decisions to move within and outside an organisation. In addition, we investigate whether these factors influence decisions differently based on gender and generation. We found that fit, links, and sacrifice can explain both intra- and extra-organisational mobility. However, Generation Y employees are more likely to move based on reasons related to fit than Generation X or Baby Boomer employees, and women are more likely to move internally based on reasons of sacrifice than men. This research extends theories about job embeddedness to the domain of intra-organisational mobility, indicating that this theory can explain why employees leave their organisation and their role within an organisation. Given the increasing competition for employees, organisations are interested in understanding what factors can influence employees' decision to stay in their organisation, transferring internally rather than turning over. This research indicates that employers should consider reasons based on links, fit, and sacrifice; and understand that these factors may matter more or less to employees based on their demographic group. No previous works have investigated how job embeddedness impacts movement within an organisation instead of focusing on turnover or extra-organisational moves.

Keywords: employees; intra-organisational mobility; gender; job; organisational psychology

Despite the increasing value associated with retaining top talent, average employee tenure continues to drop, and organisations struggle to retain top talent (Keller & Meaney, 2017). Survey data indicates that only 7% of Fortune 500 executives believe they can retain high performing employees (Keller & Meaney, 2017), yet 51% of all US employees surveyed in Gallup's Workforce Panel study indicated they were currently seeking a new job outside of their organisation (Mann & McCarville, 2015). The extra-organisational movement also carries negative consequences for the firm from an economic and financial standpoint (Bidwell, 2011). In the current economic environment, characterised by an all-time low employment rate, a surge of millennials into the workforce, and the 'Me Too' movement, the imperative for understanding what impacts employees' intentions to stay and move within an organisation is at a critical juncture (Bentley et al., 2019). To keep their best and brightest, organisations need to foster career satisfaction and advancement by providing opportunities for employees to grow and enhance their knowledge, skills, and experience.

Organisations looking to retain top talent must incorporate strategies to increase intra-organisational mobility intentions, which describe the extent to which employees are willing to fulfil their current position in another department or to fulfil another (upward or lateral) position within the same organisation (Thijssen et al., 2008). The willingness to facilitate intra-organisational movements can be seen as allowing the employee to remain internally employable and offer development (Hall & Mirvis, 1995; Thijssen et al., 2008). Such movement can be instrumental in employees' career development (Biemann & Wolf, 2009). Though past research has examined employees' reasons for leaving their organisation altogether (Firth et al., 2004), less attention has been paid to why employees move within the same organisation.

To address this gap, our study examined the role of job embeddedness theory in predicting inter-and intra-mobility. Job embeddedness has been linked to job satisfaction, leader-member relationships, intent to leave or stay at a current job, and turnover in varying degrees (Harris et al., 2011). However, researchers to date have not tested whether job embeddedness theory applies in the context of internal movement. Thus, a primary goal of this study was to examine employees' decisions to move within an organisation based on job embeddedness theory (Holtom et al., 2006; Mitchell et al., 2001). By analysing survey data from 2,786 employees at a large healthcare organisation, we compared the fit of a model of job embeddedness for employees transferring roles both within and outside of the organisation. Moreover, we examined the role of two other demographic variables, gender and generation, in predicting job embeddedness and subsequent mobility.

Intra-organisational mobility

Though research on mobility has primarily focused on external mobility or turnover, some studies have examined the benefits of intra-organisational mobility for employees and organisations. Voluntary internal mobility is related to income growth, and intra-organisational career shifts are promotions at the top management level (Chudzikowski, 2012). In addition to these tangible career benefits, employees at all career stages who experience internal mobility experience an affective boost toward their career, such that these employees experience a boost in career satisfaction (Rigotti et al., 2014). Additional evidence suggests that the benefits of internal mobility extend to the organisations within which these employees work. While external hires are paid more than promoted workers and have higher levels of education, workers internally promoted into jobs have significantly better performance than external hires and demonstrate lower rates of voluntary and involuntary turnover (Bidwell, 2011).

To better understand the antecedents to intra-organisational mobility, Anderson and colleagues (1981) introduced a theoretical framework for understanding intra-organisational mobility that focuses on environmental, organisational, and workforce characteristics influencing perceptions of mobility, satisfaction, and work behaviours. This model emphasised the importance of several independent variables in influencing internal mobility. However, much like earlier theory addressing external mobility, this framework provides little detail regarding the impact of employee relationships within their organisation. In contrast, we posit that the aforementioned relationships and employee forms with their organisation may also play an important role in understanding internal mobility. We draw from job embeddedness theory to capture and conceptualise these relationships (Mitchell et al., 2001).

Job embeddedness

Job embeddedness, which captures a broad range of work and community-related influences on employee retention, was originally introduced in the turnover literature to expand our understanding of the factors influencing employees' decisions to stay or leave their organisations (Mitchell et al., 2001). The construct is comprised of three sub facets: links, fit, and sacrifice. While links describe the social, psychological, and

financial connections that an employee forms with institutions or other people, fit describes an employee's perceived compatibility with their organisation or environment, and sacrifice describes the perceived social or material cost of leaving ones organisation (Mitchell et al., 2001). Embeddedness is particularly valuable as a predictor of voluntary turnover as it provides incremental variance beyond job attitudes, satisfaction, organisational commitment, job alternatives, and job search (Crossley et al., 2007; Mitchell et al., 2001).

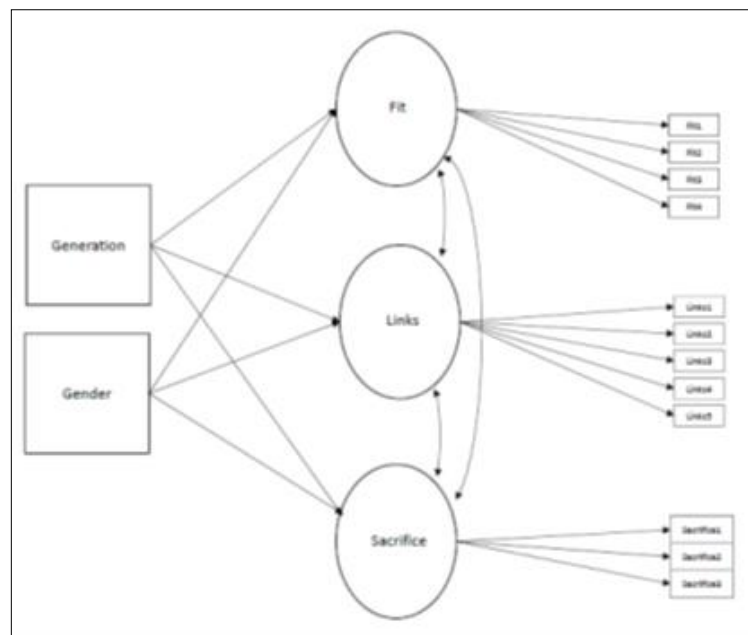
While the effects of job embeddedness on employees' decisions to leave or stay at their organisation are relatively clear (Firth et al., 2004), less is known about how this theory may apply to employees interested in staying within their organisation leaving their position. Building from their initial theory and findings related to job embeddedness, Lee and colleagues' later work more explicitly bifurcated job embeddedness into organisational dimensions, which describe an employee's embeddedness while on the job, and community dimensions, which describe embeddedness while off the job (Lee et al., 2004). Presumably, community dimensions of job embeddedness would not explain intra-organisational mobility as one's community does not typically change when transferring to another role within their organisation; however, organisational dimensions of job embeddedness would. Thus, we hypothesise:

Hypothesis 1: On-the-job embeddedness theory will apply to intra- and extra-organisational mobility in the same fashion, such that internal transfer employees will draw upon organisational links, fit, and sacrifice in their decisions to move.

Antecedents to internal mobility choices and embeddedness

One way to increase the understanding of job embeddedness in employees' internal mobility decisions is to examine the possible antecedents involved more closely. Previous research has identified both motivational and social antecedents to job embeddedness and internal mobility (Kiazad et al., 2015). Cultural and social variables can also relate to an employee 's relationship with their environment (Allen & Shanock, 2013). In addition to the motivational and social variables predicting embeddedness, we posit that demographic variables may predict the extent to which employees experience embeddedness and, subsequently, how embeddedness relates to internal mobility choices. To better understand the role of demographically-tied antecedents to internal mobility choices, we examine the role of gender and generation (see Figure 1).

Figure 1
Hypothesised Model of Antecedents Influencing Reasons for Internal Mobility by Three factors of Job Embeddedness



A number of studies provide evidence that gender has a salient impact on work experiences for women and men. For example, women receive lower wages for the same type of work, fewer opportunities for

development and promotion, and less job security (International Labour Organization, 2010). While women experience more turnover overall, men experience more intra-organisational mobility; moreover, having more children positively influences men's intra-organisational mobility and increases women's turnover (Valcour & Tolbert, 2003).

Within the embeddedness construct, we expect that women and men may not differ in the extent to which they rely on fit and links to make internal mobility decisions, but rather gender differences will be most salient in regard to sacrifice. We expect these patterns of results to persist in our sample of internal transfer employees. That is, we expect men to be more likely to transfer due to on-the-job fit, as this construct includes factors like how challenged one feels within their position. We expect that women will be more likely to transfer internally due to on-the-job sacrifice concerns, as this construct focuses on work-family conflict. Thus, we hypothesise:

Hypothesis 2: On-the-job embeddedness will differentially impact women's and men's mobility decisions, such that (a) women will be more likely to transfer for reasons of sacrifice than men, and (b) men will be more likely to transfer for reasons of fit than women.

Organisations employ workers that cross *generations* and hence have to adapt organisational policies to meet the diverse set of individuals' needs (Sok et al., 2013). It is therefore not surprising that age has become an important factor in organisational research. Research has reported that older employees are less willing to change their occupation than are their younger counterparts (Blau, 2000) but are more willing to accept a lateral occupational change without promotion (Ostroff & Clark, 2001). Generation Y employees are less likely to remain content with their environment and more likely to engage in a series of job changes to find what best fits them (Tulgan, 2009).

In contrast to their elders, younger workers are much less likely to commit an entire career to the first organisation they work with (Dobrev & Merluzzi, 2018). While a number of factors have contributed to this shift, generational differences in values and expectations may play important roles in predicting job embeddedness. In particular, some evidence suggests that younger workers may place more emphasis on their fit with an organisation or workgroup than older workers (Tulgan, 2009). We expect similar patterns to emerge in our sample of employees. Because fit is more closely aligned with seeking career opportunities, we expect that younger generations of employees will be more likely to transfer internally due to fit than older employees. Thus, we hypothesise:

Hypothesis 3: Generation X and Y employees will be more likely than Baby Boomers to transfer for reasons of fit.

METHODS

Participants

Because job embeddedness has been established to explain turnover, we wanted to initially establish the same pattern with our survey tool before investigating our central hypothesis as it applies to internal mobility. We have two samples: one with employees exiting the organisation and one with employees moving within the organisation. Participants were 2,786 employees (2221 women, 565 men) from a large healthcare organisation in the Southwest who completed a survey within one month of leaving the organisation ($N = 1871$; 1460 women; 411 men) or moving to another department within the same organisation ($N = 915$; 761 Women; 154 Men). Of the participants who transferred within the organisation, 30.2% were Black, 27.2% were White, 20.8% Asian, and 20.7% Hispanic (remaining employees falling in Other races)¹. Transfer employees were primarily Generation X (born 1965–1980) (45.2%) followed by Generation Y (born 1981–2000, although there were no individuals in the sample born past 1994) (36.3%) and Baby Boomer (born 1946–1964) (18.5%) with an average age of 39.7 years ($SD = 10.18$). Of the participants who left the organisation, 38.4% were White, 27.2% were Black, 18.4% Asian, and 14.3% Hispanic (remaining employees falling in Other races). Employees were primarily Generation X (born 1965–1980) (42.4%) followed by Generation Y (born 1981–2000, although there were no individuals in the sample born past 1994) (41.7%) and Baby Boomer (born 1946–1964) (15.8%) with an average age of 54.9 years ($SD = 5.04$).

¹ Though the focus of our manuscript was on gender and generation, given the demographic diversity present in our sample, we also ran our analyses by race and found no statistically significant differences between models.

Measurement

Job embeddedness. The survey comprised 12 items (provided in Table 1) tapping into employees' reasons for leaving the institution or moving to another department. Items were rated from 'strongly disagree' (1) to 'strongly agree' (5) falling into three categories of reasons: four reasons that were related to fit ($\alpha = .83$), five reasons related to Links ($\alpha = .96$), and three reasons related to sacrifice ($\alpha = .76$). To establish construct validity of our job embeddedness measure, we used abbreviated measures of existing scales with a subsample of our internal transfer employees ($n = 111$). Specifically, we examined the relationship between the global measure of job embeddedness ($\alpha = .91$, example item 'It was difficult for me to leave...'; Crossley et al., 2007) with our measure of fit ($r = .31$), links ($r = .38$) and sacrifice ($r = .35$), demonstrating initial evidence of convergent validity. We also examined the relationships between our scales with the respective scales of fit ($r = .46$), links ($r = .20$) and sacrifice ($r = .23$) of Mitchell et al. (2001), demonstrating additional evidence of convergent validity.

RESULTS

Confirmatory factor analysis

Exit survey data. A CFA was conducted with the Exit Survey data using MPlus 7.4 to test the fit of a 3 factor model (Fit, Sacrifice, and Links) with 12 indicators loading on the factors. The full data set was randomly split into two samples for cross-validation purposes: first sample ($N = 935$) and second sample ($N = 936$). The FIML technique for handling missing data was used (Newman, 2003). Multiple indicators of fit indicated that the model was good: $\chi^2(51) = 151.32$, $RMSEA = .05$, $CFI = .99$, $TLI = .98$, $SRMR = .04$. Not surprisingly with a sample of this size, the chi-square test of model fit was significant (e.g., Kline, 1998), but all other fit indices were good. Cross-validation of this final three-factor model with the second sample ($N = 936$) also showed good fit: $\chi^2(51) = 187.12$, $RMSEA = .05$, $CFI = .98$, $TLI = .97$, $SRMR = .04$. Table 1 shows all loadings associated with indicators of fit, sacrifice, and links were significant.

Internal transfer survey data. The CFA provided a good fit for a model of how job embeddedness might influence people to leave an organisation. Our central hypothesis assessed how well the job embeddedness model fit for individuals moving within a company, rather than moving out of an organisation. We applied the same factor model to a sample of internal transfer survey data: responses from individuals who had transferred positions within the organisation ($N = 915$). All loadings associated with indicators of fit, sacrifice, and links were significant (Table 1). Multiple indicators of fit indicated that the model was good: $\chi^2(51) = 189.25$, $RMSEA = .05$, $CFI = .97$, $TLI = .96$, $SRMR = .04$.

Structural equation model

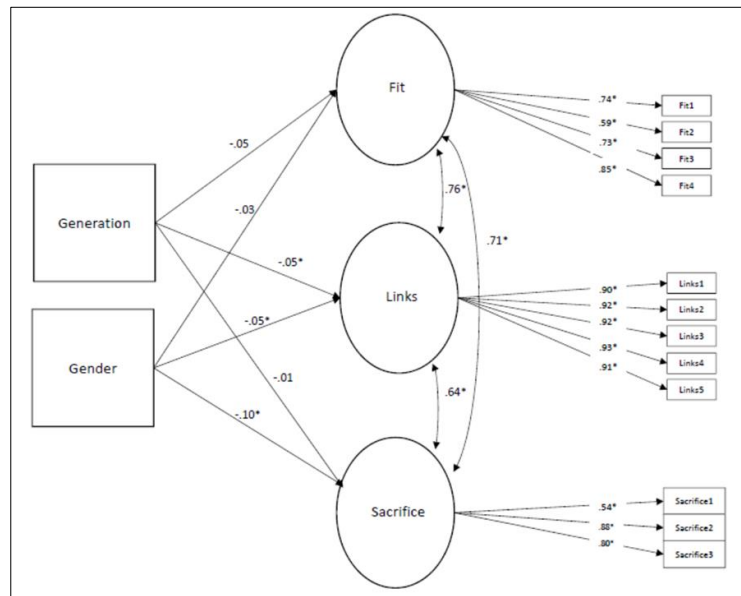
Next, we performed SEM analysis to evaluate the relations between individual antecedents to the 3 factors related to job embeddedness. We examined the role of gender and generation on fit, links, and sacrifice reasons for leaving an organisation (exit data; see Figure 2) and for moving within an organisation (internal transfer; see Figure 3).

Table 1

Unstandardised loadings and standardised loadings for 3-factor confirmatory model of leaving an organisation (Exit; $N = 1,871$) and transferring within an organisation (Internal Mobility; $N = 915$)

Item	Label	Fit				Links				Sacrifice			
		Unstandardised		Standardised		Unstandardised		Standardised		Unstandardised		Standardised	
		Exit	IM	Exit	IM	Exit	IM	Exit	IM	Exit	IM	Exit	IM
The jobs was realistically presented to me when I was hired into this department.	F1	1.00(-)	1.00(-)	0.74	0.56								
My skills and abilities were a good match with the challenges in my job.	F2	0.73(.03)	0.74(.08)	0.59	0.44								
I was given real opportunity to improve my skills through education and training programmes.	F3	1.01(0.3)	1.22(.10)	0.73	0.64								
For the most part, my job met my expectations.	F4	1.13(.03)	1.35(.09)	0.85	0.75								
My manager handled performance reviews fairly and effectively.	L1					1.00(-)	1.00(-)	0.90	0.85				
My manager supported new ideas and new ways of doing things.	L2					1.03(0.1)	1.02(.03)	0.92	0.87				
My manager understood what motivated me in my job.	L3					1.06(.01)	1.05(.03)	0.92	0.89				
My manager treated employees with fairness and respect.	L4					1.10(.01)	1.08(.03)	0.93	0.89				
There was effective communication with my previous supervisor.	L5					1.08(.02)	.98(.03)	0.91	0.83				
I rarely felt emotionally drained from my work.	S1									1.00(-)	1.00(-)	0.54	0.48
Options were available to help me balance my work and personal responsibilities.	S2									1.49(.07)	1.75(.12)	0.88	0.90
I was generally able to balance job requirements and personal/family life.	S3									1.29(.06)	1.31(.10)	0.80	0.72

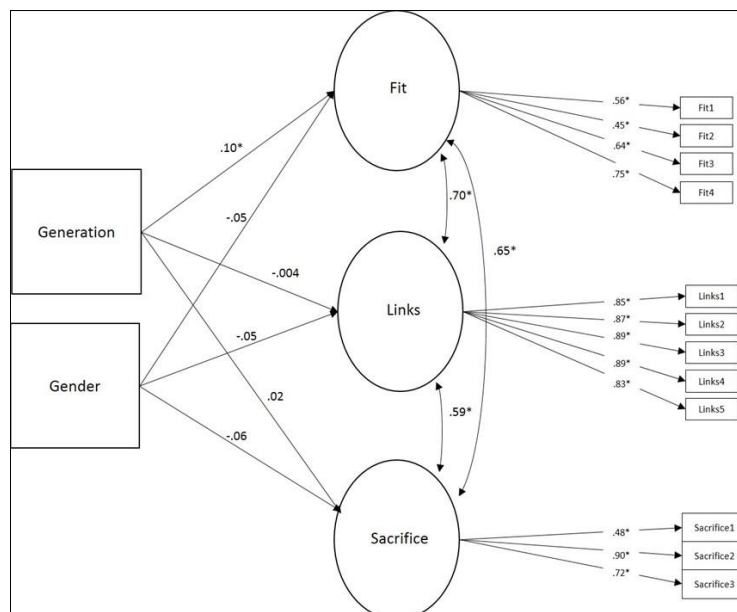
Figure 2. Structural model of individual antecedents predicting reasons for leaving an organisation. Significant paths are indicated with a * for $p < .05$.



Exit survey data. First, we examined the relative contributions of gender and generation to influencing employees ($N = 1871$) towards Fit, Sacrifice, or Links in external job mobility. Fit of the model was good: $\chi^2(69) = 364.346$, $RMSEA = .05$, $CFI = .98$, $TLI = .97$, $SRMR = .04$. As shown in Figure 2, there was a significant path from Gender to Links (-.05) and to Sacrifice (-.10). There was a significant path from Generation to Links (-.05) and a trend toward a path from Generation to Fit (-.05; $p = .07$).

Internal transfer data. Next, we examined the relative contributions of these antecedents towards Fit, Sacrifice, or Links in internal job mobility ($N = 915$; see Figure 3). Fit of the model was good: $\chi^2(69) = 240.19$, $RMSEA = .05$, $CFI = .97$, $TLI = .96$, $SRMR = .04$. As shown in Figure 3, there was a significant path from Generation to Fit (.10). There was a path from Gender to Sacrifice that was marginally significant (-.06; $p = .09$). These relationships were explored in more depth in multi-group analyses below.

Figure 3. Structural model of individual antecedents predicting reasons for internal mobility. Significant paths are indicated with a * for $p < .05$.



Supplemental analysis: Generational and gender differences for internal mobility

A multi-group CFA was conducted to examine how Generation is related to reasons for internal mobility. To establish strong measurement invariance of our three-factor model of Job Embeddedness, we assessed models for configural variance, metric invariance, and scalar invariance. First, CFA's were conducted separately for each age group: Generation Y ($\chi^2(51) = 104.54$, $CFI = .96$, $TLI = .94$, $RMSEA = .06$), Generation X ($\chi^2(51) = 95.75$, $CFI = .98$, $TLI = .97$, $RMSEA = .05$), and Baby Boomers ($\chi^2(51) = 84.97$, $CFI = .96$, $TLI = .94$, $RMSEA = .06$). Second, the model was tested in all groups allowing all parameters to be free, ($\chi^2(153) = 286.17$, $CFI = .97$, $TLI = .96$, $RMSEA = .05$). Next, we tested for metric invariance, holding factor loadings equal. The metric invariance model fit well ($\chi^2(171) = 302.26$, $CFI = .97$, $TLI = .96$, $RMSEA = .05$) and did not result in a significant decrease in fit relative to the configural model ($\Delta\chi^2(18) = 12.25$, $p > .83$). Finally, we assessed a model that indicated scalar invariance with good fit ($\chi^2(189) = 324.96$, $CFI = .96$, $TLI = .96$, $RMSEA = .05$) and no significant decrease in fit relative to the metric invariance model ($\Delta\chi^2(18) = 24.57$, $p > .14$). The presence of "strong invariance" allowed us to test group differences in factor means for Fit, Links, and Sacrifice.

Generation Y had a significantly lower mean factor score for Fit compared to Generation X ($\Delta M = -0.11$; $p = .05$) and especially compared to Baby Boomers ($\Delta M = -0.28$; $p = .01$). These differences indicate that Generation Y was significantly more likely than the other two generations to transfer for reasons of fit in support of Hypothesis 3, whereas Links and Sacrifice reasons are equally likely to be a source of transfer across generations. Thus, we find partial support for hypothesis 3.

We also examined how Gender is related to reasons for internal mobility. First, CFA's were conducted separately for each gender group: Male ($\chi^2(51) = 64.50$, $CFI = .97$, $TLI = .96$, $RMSEA = .04$) and Female ($\chi^2(51) = 167.96$, $CFI = .97$, $TLI = .96$, $RMSEA = .06$). Second, the model was tested for configural invariance, ($\chi^2(132) = 217.26$, $CFI = .97$, $TLI = .96$, $RMSEA = .05$). Next, we tested for metric invariance, which fit well ($\chi^2(111) = 227.28$, $CFI = .97$, $TLI = .96$, $RMSEA = .05$) and did not result in a significant decrease in fit relative to the configural model ($\Delta\chi^2(9) = 8.86$, $p > .45$). Finally, we assessed a model that indicated scalar invariance with good fit ($\chi^2(120) = 237.20$, $CFI = .97$, $TLI = .96$, $RMSEA = .05$) and no significant decrease in fit relative to the metric invariance model ($\Delta\chi^2(9) = 11.08$, $p > .27$). The presence of "strong invariance" allowed us to test group differences in factor means for Fit, Links, and Sacrifice.

Females had a marginally significantly lower mean factor score for sacrifice compared to Males ($\Delta M = -0.11$; $p = .08$), indicating that women are more likely than men to transfer within an organisation for reasons of sacrifice, whereas Fit and Links reasons are equally likely to be a source of transfer across men and women. Thus, our findings provide some support for Hypothesis 2a but no support for Hypothesis 2b.

DISCUSSION

The primary aim of this study was to identify whether job embeddedness theory could explain the reasons for employees' internal mobility within an organisation. Secondly, the study explored the role of individual demographics as antecedents on an employee's mobility decision. A confirmatory factor analysis revealed strong support for job embeddedness' application to internal mobility to address the first aim. Specifically, the responses to an employee survey on reasons for internal transfer were robustly explained by the three facets of job embeddedness (Caleb & Relejo-Howell, 2019; Mitchell et al., 2001). Thus, our findings indicate that the job embeddedness theory captures reasons for internal mobility in the same way it captures reasons for external mobility.

To address the second aim, we used a structural equation model to examine the contributions of the individual antecedents to predicting reasons for internal mobility. We examined the role of gender and generation on outcomes for internal mobility. We found that gender and generation significantly impacted employee reasons for internal mobility. Specifically, generation significantly predicted internal mobility. A multi-group model of generation revealed that fit, links, and sacrifice reasons are a source of internal mobility for all three generations. However, Generation Y was significantly more likely to transfer internally for Fit reasons than Generation X and Baby Boomers. Additional analyses of gender revealed that women were significantly more likely to transfer internally for sacrifice than men.

Limitations and future directions

Though our study provides a number of important theoretical and practical implications, future research might address some of the limitations of our research. For example, this study is limited in that our data were cross-sectional, and thus, we are unable to draw causal inferences from our findings. In addition, the study was limited in that it used self-report measures of fit, links, and sacrifice and was limited in the number of items used to measure each. However, both generation and gender are individual difference constructs measured by objective data (i.e., are not psychological constructs measured by self-report), and thus our study design should alleviate some concerns regarding common method variance. Still, future research might measure embeddedness and turnover longitudinally, focusing on how links, fit, and sacrifice differentially impact employees' decisions to stay in their positions or organisations or leave altogether.

CONCLUSIONS

Best class organisations can offer internal mobility for employees upward of 50% (DDI Development International, 2015). We found that employees move within organisations due to fit, links and sacrifice, but generation and gender play an important part in understanding what may be driving these reasons. Our findings indicate that job embeddedness predicts external and internal mobility decisions similarly. Organisations may consider offering additional opportunities for an internal transfer to employees likely to turn over for reasons related to job embeddedness. Moreover, organisations should consider gender- and generation-related reasons for internal mobility and consider the needs of different employees when designing job embeddedness interventions. Understanding how demographic traits influence movement can ensure the health of an organisation, maximise job embeddedness, and ensure precursors to potential turnover is not being overlooked.

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