Illuminating the Other Road: 
The Role of Voice in IT Turnover 

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Abstract

Hirschman’s 1970 framework of exit, voice, and loyalty [13] provides the foundation for adding “voice” to the IT turnover picture. For dissatisfied employees, voice is an alternative to exit; by definition, voice is any attempt to change rather than escape from a dissatisfying situation. The management literature on voice is applied to develop a model of exit and voice for dissatisfied IT professionals. This model augments prior IT research models by bringing voice and its antecedents into the picture. Directions for future research and implications for practice are provided.

1. Introduction

In Albert O. Hirschman’s [13] classic treatise on exit, voice, and loyalty, he contends that when dissatisfied, an employee has two discreet options: exit or voice. Exit is defined as leaving the organization (i.e., voluntary turnover) and voice is “any attempt at all to change, rather than to escape from, an objectionable state of affairs” [13, p. 30]. If the employee chooses neither of these, Hirschman describes the individual as exhibiting loyalty. Loyalty, in effect, is deciding to put up with the dissatisfying situation, declining to exit or voice.

Most elements of Hirschman’s framework are acknowledged in studies of IT turnover (e.g., [30]). Job satisfaction is typically posited and shown to have an inverse relationship with exit, which is operationalized as actual turnover or turnover intention. And affective commitment is presumed to contribute to Hirschman’s position of loyalty and is normally modeled as an inhibitor to turnover (exit). But the option of voice for the dissatisfied IT professional is not represented in our turnover research.

Voice is the alternative to exit for IT workers seeking relief from a dissatisfying job situation, which makes it a vital element in the management of turnover. A recent survey reported that 54% of employees staying put during the difficult labor market are likely to seek new jobs once the economy improves [1]. When labor markets improve, effective management of voice will be central to curtailting the turnover of valued IT employees. It is therefore imperative that we broaden our view of turnover to acknowledge the alternate road of voice.

Conceivably, voice is the portion of the turnover picture over which managers have the most control. As managers, we want our valued IT professionals to communicate their dissatisfaction and give us an opportunity to correct the situation, rather than move directly to exit. But managers may not be providing an environment conducive to voice. In order to increase the likelihood that valued members of an IT organization will exercise voice instead of jumping to exit, we need to enhance our understanding of factors that influence the decision to voice.

Also, beyond circumventing turnover of valued employees, voice is vital to proper organizational functioning. Employee feedback is essential – it is no longer possible to figure it out from the top, from only the manager’s chair [27]. Employee voice alerts management to its shortcomings; once alerted, needed corrections can be made in the functioning of the organization. Or, put a bit more bluntly: dissatisfied employees can “kick up a fuss and thereby force improved quality or service upon delinquent management” [13, p. 30]. Hirschman further suggests that an organization’s most valuable members are the ones likely to “make a fuss… until such time as they do exit” [13, p. 49].

In the broader realm of turnover research, Withey and Cooper [33] encourage researchers to examine a range of behaviors available to employees who are unhappy with their work, rather than concentrating on the single behavior of exit. Similarly, Hom and Griffeth [14] urge researchers to expand theory to explain why dissatisfaction does not automatically engender exit. In accordance, this paper applies the management literature concerning voice to IT turnover, positing a
research model that explicates the potential role of voice in managing the turnover of IT personnel. Directions for future research are provided along with implications for practice.

2. The role of voice in IT turnover

Figure 1 summarizes the role that voice is posited to play relative to exit for dissatisfied IT professionals. Because Hirschman’s framework assumes a dissatisfying situation, this model applies to dissatisfied IT workers. In other words, employee dissatisfaction is a boundary condition for the model. In this section, the constructs and relationships in the model are explained.

*Voice* is more specifically defined as: “verbal behavior that is improvement-oriented and directed to a specific target who holds power inside the organization” [7, p. 870]. *Exit* is the act of leaving an employing organization, and this is typically operationalized as actual turnover or turnover intention. *Loyalty* is choosing neither exit nor voice. Because loyalty is defined as the lack of exit and voice actions, it is represented within parentheses in the model. Some management studies have used affective commitment as a proxy for loyalty (e.g., [5]), and the present model captures the rationalization that affective commitment may influence the decision to put up with the dissatisfaction rather than to voice or to exit.

The inverse relationship of *affective commitment* to exit is well documented in management and IT research, as the strength of an individual’s identification with and involvement in an organization [25] reduces the likelihood of employee exit (e.g., [15], [16], [17], [31]). Similarly, the positive relationship between *perceived job alternatives* and exit is well established (e.g., [17], [21], [30]). Affective commitment also has been shown to mediate the effect of perceived job alternatives on turnover [30] and this is represented in the model.

This brings us to the voice portion of the model, delineated by dotted lines in Figure 1. Withey and Cooper [33] and Burris et al. [5] reported significant positive correlations between affective commitment and voice. Support for the positive influence of affective commitment on voice is found in Hirschman’s original writing: “A member with a considerable attachment to (an) organization will often search for ways to make himself influential… when the organization moves in what he believes is the wrong direction” [13, p. 78]. Perceived job alternatives is posited to negatively influence a dissatisfied
employee’s tendency to voice, based on Hirschman [13, p. 83]: “easy availability of the exit option makes the recourse to voice less likely.”

Proactive personality is defined as a disposition toward taking personal initiative to influence one’s environment [6] and proactive personalities are characterized as persevering to bring about meaningful change [4]. Fuller and Marler [12] recently conducted a meta-analysis of the proactive personality literature and concluded that this individual trait is positively related to voice, as reflected in the present model.

Withey and Cooper [33, p. 535] recognized the existence of “barriers” to voice, and Detert and Burris [7, p. 869] extended this by focusing on “organizational conditions that favor or inhibit” voice. Two pertinent constructs developing in the management literature are psychological safety and psychological futility.

Hirschman [13] stated that the probability of improvement being achievable by voice will influence the individual’s decision to voice. This prospect for effectiveness of voice is captured in the emerging construct of “psychological futility.” The construct has roots in Ashford, Rothbard, Piderit, and Dutton’s [2] discussion of context favorability in issue selling, and a three-item scale for psychological futility was developed by Burris et al. [5]: Trying to improve things around here by speaking up is a waste of time; It is useless for me to suggest new ways of doing things here; Nothing changes even if I speak up (to my manager). However, a definition of this construct was not identified in the literature. Based on the work of Burris et al. [5], the following definition of psychological futility of voice is proposed: the belief that engaging in voice will not lead to desired outcomes. Going forward, we refer to this construct as PFV. As expected, Burris et al. [5] reported a significant inverse correlation between PFV and voice.

In addition to inhibiting voice, PFV is expected to enhance the probability of exit, based on the original writings of Hirschman [13, p. 37]: “... the decision whether to exit will often be taken in light of the prospects for the effective use of voice” (italics in the original). This is captured by the positive relationship between PFV and exit in the proposed model.

Psychological safety of voice also has roots in Ashford et al.’s [2] consideration of context favorability, and Edmondson [10] addressed it at a workgroup level in her model of team learning via a construct of team psychological safety. Walumbwa and Schaubroeck [32] also examined an aggregated construct of work group psychological safety. In the realm of turnover, however, psychological safety of voice is an individual-level construct. Detert and Burris [7] define it as the belief that engaging in voice will not lead to personal harm. Empirical support for a positive relationship between PSV and voice was found by Burris et al. [5] and by Detert and Burris [7], and this association is reflected in the present model.

The construct of managerial openness also originates in research on issue selling, supporting the notion that people read the context of their workplace for clues about how the raising of an issue is likely to be received [2] [8]. Detert and Burris [7] define the construct of managerial openness as subordinates’ perceptions that their boss listens to them, is interested in their ideas, gives fair consideration to the ideas presented, and at least sometimes takes action to address the matter raised. In general, leader behaviors such as managerial openness affect the motivation of subordinates to speak up [2] [22]. Specifically, Detert and Burris [7] found that managerial openness enhanced subordinates’ psychological safety of voice (PSV), which in turn positively influenced the subordinate’s propensity to voice.

The present model posits PFV and PSV to mediate the effect of managerial behavior on an individual’s choice of voice or exit. A positive association is posited for managerial openness and PSV, based on the previously noted finding of Detert and Burris [7]. PFV was not examined by Detert and Burris but, given the definitions of the PFV and managerial openness constructs, the present model theorizes a negative relationship between managerial openness and PFV. In sum, managerial openness is expected to enhance psychological safety of voice and reduce psychological futility of voice.

2.1. Key inferences drawn from the model

Based on the model in Figure 1, we consider the factors involved when a dissatisfied IT worker chooses exit instead of voice. Essentially, low affective commitment, high perceived job alternatives, and high psychological futility of voice are theorized to be the primary determinants of exit. This reflects the classic push-pull framework of turnover [21], but with the added element of perceived futility of voice as a contributor to deciding to exit.

Based on the proposed model, the primary contributors to a dissatisfied IT professional’s decision to voice rather than exit are: high affective commitment, low
perceived job alternatives, a proactive personality, high psychological safety of voice (PSV), and low psychological futility of voice (PFV). Voice is indirectly influenced by managerial openness, as this type of management behavior is posited to enhance employee PSV and reduce PFV.

When voice is enacted and is successful, then job satisfaction is restored and the individual is no longer represented in the Figure 1 model (which assumes job dissatisfaction).

If voice is enacted and is not successful, then the “voice” portion of the model (delineated by dotted lines) is gone for the employee. When voice is no longer a viable option, the model is similar to the models utilized to-date in IT turnover research reflecting only the decision of whether or not to exit.

Figure 2 illustrates how the new voice constructs and relationships augment the summary model of IT turnover that emerged from the meta-analysis by Joseph and his colleagues [17]. The bold text elements and arrows in Figure 2 represent constructs and relationships drawn from the model of voice and exit of the dissatisfied IT professional developed in the present paper (Figure 1).

Mapping the voice-exit model on to the summary turnover model (as is done in Figure 2) broadens our understanding of IT employee turnover. The decision to leave an organization is not an isolated decision; in choosing to exit, the individual is also choosing NOT to try (or continue to try) to change the present dissatisfying situation. In this way, the choice between turnover and voice constitutes a fork in the road for the dissatisfied employee.

Figure 2 captures this juncture by recognizing that while established job-related, individual, and organizational factors influence an employee’s decision to exit, at the same time factors related to job, individual, and organization are influencing the dissatisfied employee’s election of voice. The model also elucidates an important path that has not been acknowledged in IT turnover research: the path from voice to job search and then turnover, which can occur when an individual exercises voice but voice proves unsuccessful in alleviating the dissatisfaction. This leaves the IT employee with only one path to relieve the experienced dissatisfaction: exit.

3. Directions for future research

Initial tests of the model may focus on the voice portion of Figure 1, to confirm or refine those relationships. Then studies of a more qualitative and observational nature would help us understand important realities of voice-exit decisions. Researchers should consider the following issues in moving this stream of research forward.

Given the dependent variables of exit and voice, it is important to control for organizational tenure in testing.
the proposed model in Figure 1. Rusbult, Farrell, Rogers, and Mainous [26] found organizational tenure to significantly correlate with exit and voice. Studies of turnover (exit) traditionally control for organizational tenure, and recent studies of voice also have included organizational tenure as a control variable (e.g., [5], [7]).

Steers and Mowday [29] were among the first management researchers to spotlight the role of voice as a potentially intervening factor in the turnover process. Employees who succeed in changing dissatisfying work situations inherently alleviate their dissatisfaction, shifting intent to leave to an intent to remain [28]. Given this circumventing nature of the role that voice can play, researchers are urged to examine actual turnover and not solely turnover intention in studies of voice and exit for dissatisfied IT workers. Simply put, voice – when effectively exercised – can dissolve turnover intention before it progresses to actual exit.

Withey and Cooper [33] note that while exit and voice can be independent, such as when a dissatisfied person leaves without exercising voice, they can also be sequential. For example, an individual may choose voice and if it proves unsuccessful, then choose to exit. From the interviews they conducted, Withey and Cooper [33] identified two noteworthy sequences. In the first sequence, the dissatisfied employee exercises voice and if the voice does not resolve the situation, voice is executed again to a higher level (or alternate person who may be able to correct the situation). If that voice fails, then the individual chooses exit when availability of another job is perceived to be reasonable.

The other sequence that emerged from Withey and Cooper’s [33] interviews began with “loyalty.” Here, the employee initially chooses to put up with the dissatisfaction. But if nothing changes and enough time passes, then voice is chosen. Again, if voice is unsuccessful, perceived job availability is a primary influence on whether to exit. To assess the prevalence of these and other sequences, Withey and Cooper [33] recommend observational research over longer than six months, which was the period that they studied.

Considering voice in relation to Lee and Mitchell’s unfolding model of turnover opens up avenues for research. The intent of the unfolding model is to better understand the reasons and processes involved in leaving an organization. The proposed model of voice and exit for dissatisfied IT workers directly maps to “path 4” of the Lee and Mitchell unfolding model. In path 4, lower levels of job satisfaction initiate the cognitive analyses involved in exiting a job, instead of a shock being the precipitator. The present model of voice and exit augments Lee and Mitchell’s path 4 by acknowledging that exit is not the only option that dissatisfied workers are likely to consider. In terms of the Lee and Mitchell [19, p. 451] diagram, the present voice-exit model elucidates what likely happens between the experience of low satisfaction and path 4a (decision to exit without a job search or evaluation of job alternatives) or path 4b (job search and evaluation of alternatives). Whereas branches 4a and 4b assume the dissatisfaction leads to a desire to exit, the proposed model augments the unfolding model by recognizing that exit is not the only choice at this juncture; the employee could opt for “the other road” of voice.

Niederman, Sumner, and Maertz [24] collected data from 124 IT professionals to examine elements of the Lee and Mitchell unfolding model of turnover. They discovered two additional paths that were followed by a considerable number of the IT workers in their sample. One is a variation on Lee and Mitchell’s path 4b where IT professionals did report an engaged script, and the second is a variation on Path 1 where they did experience image violation and also reported low job satisfaction.

Both of the new scenarios that emerged from the study by Niederman and his colleagues [24] involve job dissatisfaction. These paths, then, may be better understood through the acknowledgement of voice as an alternative to exit for the dissatisfied employee. While all of the IT workers in the study had exited a job (i.e., all ultimately elected turnover), a closer examination might reveal attempts to voice that were unsuccessful, further contributing to dissatisfaction and/or image violation. Niederman and Sumner [23] encourage in-depth research examining individual cases in detail, as well as studies that contribute to our understanding of non-leavers who experience shocks or dissatisfaction. Voice may play a key role in studies of non-leavers who faced dissatisfaction, image violations, and shocks.

While on the whole the alternative of voice is not captured in Lee and Mitchell’s unfolding model, theoretically, voice is an option in all four paths. For example, if the precipitating “shock” is an unsolicited job offer that involves a significant increase in pay, the employee may well choose to voice (not exit) in an effort to improve his salary situation at his present organization. If the voice is unsuccessful, then the employee may continue along one of the paths in Lee
and Mitchell’s model. In sum, researchers are encouraged to examine the integration of voice and the unfolding model of turnover.

Some management researchers have added “neglect” to Hirschman’s exit, voice, and loyalty framework (e.g., [11]). Neglect is considered an additional, fourth, possible response to dissatisfaction. Neglect may be shown by spending less time at work and expending less effort when there [26]. Withey and Cooper [33] examined two forms of neglect: lateness and absenteeism. In their data, neglect at times appeared to be a precursor of exit, as employees who have not acted to leave or voice – but “plan” to leave – could be neglectful while they search for another job. Neglect also was sometimes connected to loyalty, in an unconstructive way. Withey and Cooper [33] noted that remaining silent and doing nothing about a situation (i.e., exhibiting neither voice nor exit) did not always represent support for the organization. They provided employee descriptions of what was technically considered loyalty (because the employee did not voice or exit) but seemed more like expressions of resignation and entrapment. This additional employee reaction to dissatisfaction – neglect – may be worthy of further examination in the context of IT work.

Finally, if PSV and PFV (safety and futility of voice) are found to significantly influence the decision to voice, further research is needed to identify managerial behaviors that enhance PSV and reduce PFV. Empirical evidence exists to support the positive association between managerial openness and PSV, but the relationship of managerial openness to PFV remains to be empirically examined. The management literature should be explored for additional supervisor behaviors that influence PSV and PFV and, consequently, the use of voice. For example, Detert and Burris [7] investigated the effect of transformational leadership behaviors on subordinate voice, but did not find consistent support for the relationship.

4. Implications for practice

While the turnover road is often paved by outside employers and the labor market, it is up to the IT workers’ own management to pave the road of voice. Ultimately, research in this area will identify specific actions that managers can take to encourage voice over exit.

Speculation is that a manager should routinely demonstrate a personal interest, listen carefully, take action, and generally demonstrate to subordinates that there is little personal risk in honest, professional communication [3] [7] [10]. Pending further research on specific actions managers can take, this general type of behavior by managers is expected to increase psychological safety of voice and minimize psychological futility of voice, which in turn should enhance the probability that valued employees will choose to voice.

5. Conclusion

In the end, we want valued IT professionals who are experiencing dissatisfaction to voice rather than exit. Enabling voice – and improving matters based on the input received – is at the heart of good management. The model of exit and voice for dissatisfied IT professionals put forth in this paper is a first step toward illuminating the other road: voice.

6. References


