



Turnover in humanitarian projects: An exploratory study of patterns and potential causes

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Employee and Employer Perspectives on Humanitarian Work



Structure of the presentation

- › Introduction of this study
- › Research question & conceptual model
- › Research approach & some coding examples
- › Case selection criteria & the selected cases
- › Steps in the analysis
- › First results
- › Preliminary conclusions & discussion



Context of this study

- › Turnover & retention: a ‘hot’ issue in the humanitarian sector => What makes (well-performing) employees continue to work for a humanitarian organization?
- › Human Resource Management as a potential solution
- › What is the effect of HRM on turnover in humanitarian organizations?
 - Same effect as in the for profit sector?
 - Or: different effects due to non profit sector context?

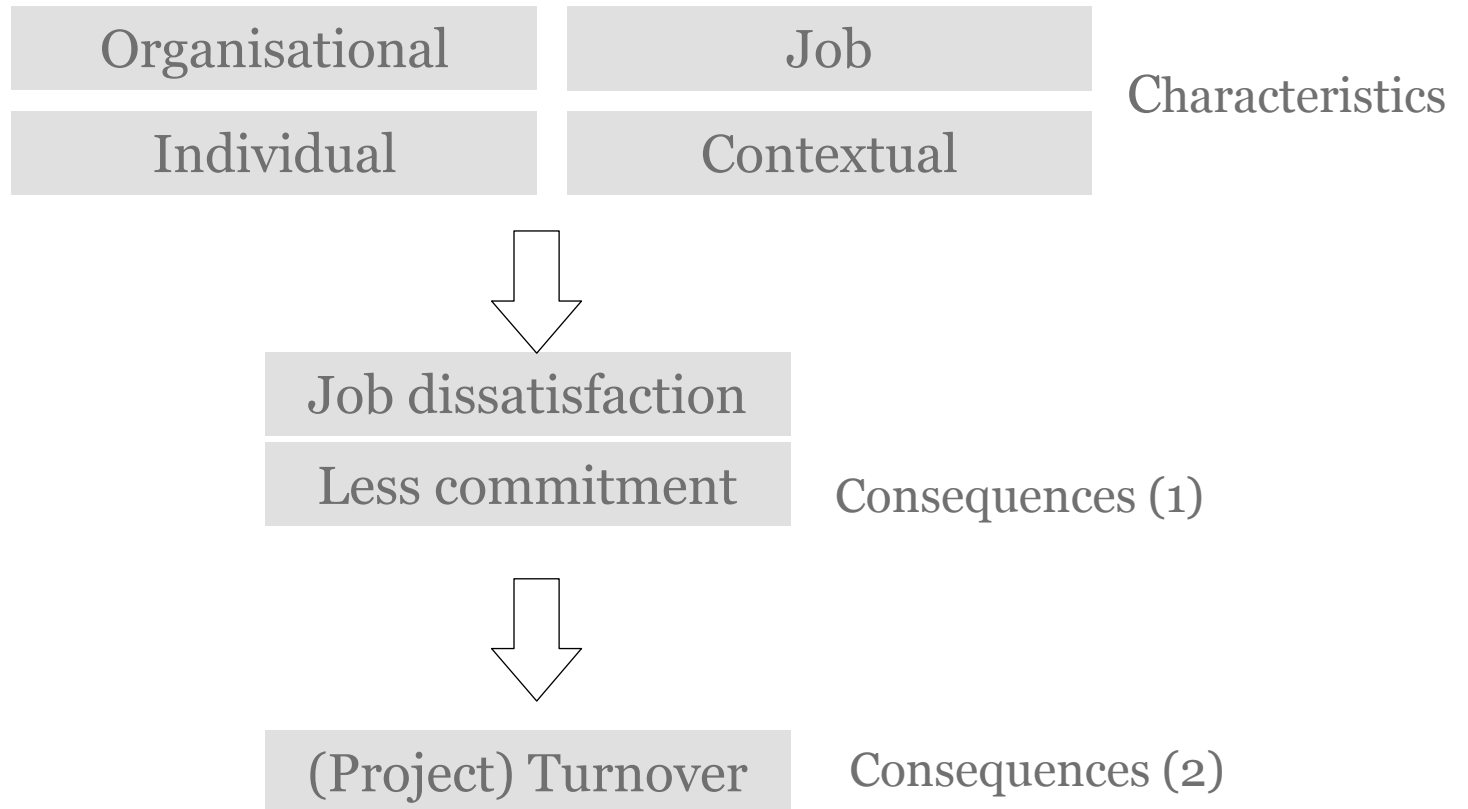


This study

- › Opportunity to study a particular kind of turnover in a humanitarian NGO: project turnover of expats
- › Exploratory case study: provides a first step to explore the relative importance of HRM in cases of project turnover
- › Research question: What are the shared characteristics of the expats who experienced project turnover in this particular humanitarian organization?



General conceptual model



Individual

Objective: Gender, age, marital status, children,
no of missions & project position

Subjective: Personal events (illness, etc),
individual job performance, personality traits &
job satisfaction

Job

Task variety + Task identity +
Task significance + Feedback of the job
Autonomy + Workload

Organizational - team

Composition: heterogeneity & flexibility
size & preference for group work
Process: social support & workload sharing
communication/cooperation

Contextual

Security concerns + cult. & pol. complexity

Organisational – HRM

Selection & recruitment

Selection: fit employee-job & employee-organ

Recruitment: job profile

Training & career development

Career development

Training during project & prior to project

Communication & worker participation

Communication with/of manager & headquarters

Participation in decisions: team & organization

Evaluation & management

Evaluation of line management by others

Project management: role project coordinator

quality of decisions

Country management: role country manager &

management team

quality of decisions

The specified conceptual model



Research approach

- › Text analysis of personnel files: performance evaluations and associated documents (email conversations, debriefing forms, notes by HRM advisor, etc)
- › Development of coding scheme based on the conceptual framework (through pilot)
- › Coding process
 - Coding of explicit reasons of turnover
 - Rest of text: coding of negative, positive & neutral statements regarding the four categories



Some coding examples

Statement

- › “I really enjoyed the job and would like to continue for a longer period”
- › “She clearly struggled with the project both on security concerns and with the remote control nature of the project”

Coding

- › Positive statement by an employee about job satisfaction (individual level)
- › Negative statement by a line manager about the context of employee’s work (security concerns)



Case selection: selection criteria

- › In 2007: **854 turnover cases**
- › ‘Formal’ turnover cases: **223**
- › ‘Formal’ turnover cases of the Dutch section: **123 cases**
- › Some country variation required, but as little as portfolio manager variation as possible: no use of portfolio X (only a few turnover cases) => **119 cases**
- › Deleting the double counts: **115 cases** left
- › Availability of required documents: **47 cases** left
- › Focus on portfolios with the least closed projects or missions: **2 portfolios** left
 - Portfolio Y: availability of **20 cases for 4 countries**
 - Portfolio Z: **10 cases of 1 country** added, to prevent too much variation in countries
- › End result: **5 countries with 30 cases** of project turnover divided over 2 portfolio managers



The selected cases

- › 14 men vs 16 women
- › 26 singles vs 4 in a relationship
- › 23 non-management positions vs 7 management positions
- › 21 between 24 and 49 years old vs 9 above 50 years old

No significant differences compared to the overall population as well as to the total group of turnover cases, except for marital status: our sample has more singles

- › Not yet tested: 12 first missionaries, 11 second missionaries, 7 third missions or more



Analyzing the personnel files: three steps

1. Analysis of project turnover reasons *explicitly* mentioned by the expat in the documents
2. Analysis of the rest of the documents: counting of the coded statements of both expats and line managers (& others) about job, context, organizational & individual characteristics = > focus on the negative statements
3. Analysis of perception discrepancies between expats and line managers



First results (1): A note on the outcome of the coding process

- › Individual category
 - Most text parts about individual performance and personality traits were produced by line managers
- › Organizational category
 - Most text parts were produced by the employees
 - No coding of ‘training prior to project’+ ‘worker participation’
- › Job category
 - Extensive operationalization did not work + hardly mentioned: only used in the general sense
- › Context category
 - Political complexity was only mentioned once (in a neutral way) => we report about ‘general security concerns’



First results (2) : Explicitly mentioned turnover reasons*

Category	No of times mentioned	Specification
Organization	11	HRM (7): <i>Management (3):</i> Role line manager (2) + Role country management (1) <i>Selection & recruitment (3):</i> Fit organization-person (2) + Fit person-job (1) <i>Communication (1):</i> Communication line manager (1) Team (4): Process (2) + Composition (2)
Individual	9	Personal/private reasons (4) Health (2) + Obligations at home/other job (1) Job dissatisfaction (1) + Individual performance (1)
Other	8	End/change of activities (4) Visa problems (2) Transfer to other project (1) + Return after extension (1)
Job	1	Workload
Total	29	

* By the employee, for the 21 cases in which this information was available



First results (3): No. of negative statements per actor *

No of negative statements	Employees	Line managers & others	Total
<i>Organizational issues</i>	81 (61,9%)	39 (37,9%)	120
<i>Individual issues</i>	27 (20,6%)	49 (47,6%)	76
<i>Job issues</i>	10 (7,6%)	6 (5,8%)	16
<i>Context issues</i>	13 (9,9%)	9 (8,7%)	22
Total	131 (100%)	103 (100%)	234

* as coded in the remainder of the documents



First results (4a): Contents of the negative statements *

Category	Employee	Line manager, HR officer, etc
<i>Individual</i>	Job dissatisfaction (11) Individual performance (10) Personal issues/situation (4) Personality traits (2)	Personality traits (23) Individual performance (19) Personal issues/situation (6) Job dissatisfaction (1)
<i>Job</i>	Workload (5) Task variety (4) Feedback of the job (1)	Workload (5) Autonomy (1)
<i>Context</i>	General context (11) Security concerns (1) Cultural complexity (1)	General context (8) Security concerns (1)

* as coded in the remainder of the documents, per actor, for three categories



First results (4b): Contents of the negative organization statements

Expats	Other actors (line manager, HR officer)
<p>Management (36) <i>Project management (12)</i> Role line manager (6) Project decisions (4) + Project strategy (2) <i>Country management (24)</i> Role country manager (6) & role CMT (9) Decisions CMT (2) + Role coordinators (7)</p> <p>HRM (27) <i>Evaluation (4)</i> Evaluation line manager (4) <i>Recruitment & selection (18)</i> Recruitment: job profile (13) Selection: General (1) + Person-org. fit (4) <i>Communication & participation (3)</i> Communication general (2) Communication line manager (1) <i>Training & career development (2)</i> Career development (2)</p> <p>Team (18) Team process (14) + Team composition (4)</p>	<p>Management (10) <i>Project management (2)</i> Role line manager (2) <i>Country management (8)</i> Role country manager (3) + role CMT(2) Decision country management team (1) Role coordinators (2)</p> <p>HRM (16) <i>Evaluation (5)</i> Evaluation line manager (5) <i>Recruitment & selection (7)</i> Selection: General (4) + Person-organ fit (3) <i>Training & career development(3)</i> Career development (3x) <i>Communication & participation (1)</i> Communication headquarters (1)</p> <p>Team (13) Team process (7) + Team composition (6)</p>



First results (4c): top five of most mentioned issues

Employees

1. Management (36)
2. HRM (27)
3. Team issues (18)
4. Job dissatisfaction & general context (11)
5. Individual performance (10)

Line managers, etc

1. Personality traits (23)
2. Individual performance (19)
3. HRM (16)
4. Team issues (13)
5. Management (10)



First results (5): Perception discrepancies between actors*

- A large perception discrepancy in 20 out of 30 cases
- 13 out of these 20 cases were located in two project countries
- The number of perception discrepancies per category:

	Individual	Organization	Job	Context
Turnover category → Degree of discrepancy in perceptions ↓				
Large discrepancy	10	14	4	5
Small (or no) discrepancy	20	10	23	21
Cases of negative consensus	0	6	3	4
Total	30	30	30	30

* Based on the analysis of negative statements per actor, per category, as coded in the remainder of the documents (i.e. not the explicitly mentioned reasons)



Preliminary conclusions

What are the shared characteristics of the 30 turnover cases?

- › *Proximate reasons* (explicitly mentioned reasons)
 - HRM is not very dominant
- › *Distant reasons* (negative statements in the documents)
 - Organizational issues very dominant on the side of the employees (management in particular)
 - Individual issues dominant on the side of the line managers
- › *Perception discrepancies*
 - Large discrepancy with concern to organizational issues: lack of consensus between employee and line manager => adds to the turnover dynamics?
 - Decreased cooperative frame of the employee?

Relative importance of organizational issues (management & HRM)?



Limitations & future plans

- › Limitations
 - One organization + lack of a control group
 - Retrospective sensemaking : a 'blame game'?
 - Project turnover is not the same as organizational turnover

- › Future plans: quantitative analysis, for example
 - Do employees differ significantly in their perceptions when compared to line managers?
 - Is project turnover a predictor of organizational turnover?
 - Identification of profiles (do employee perceptions differ when related to age, gender, marital status, tenure, etc)



Thank you!
 Questions & remarks?