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Identifying stabilizing and destabilizing factors of job change: a qualitative study of employee retention in the Hong Kong travel agency industry

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to investigate and compare the congruent and incongruent perceptions of managers and frontline employees toward employee retention in Hong Kong travel agencies. An integrated model was developed using data from 32 interviews with 16 manager–employee dyads. Findings categorized stabilizing and destabilizing factors of job change into four themes: job nature, industry factors, organizational factors, and personal factors. Key factors influencing employee turnover include high customer contact, anti-social working hours, working environment, office location, supervisor and co-worker relations, remuneration, and career prospect. We conclude by reviewing the theoretical and practical implications for travel trade industry management with regard to formulating staff retention policies and closing the perceptual gaps to reduce frontline staff turnover intention.

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Travel agency; employee turnover; employee retention; Hong Kong

1. Introduction

Dysfunctional turnover remains a serious problem in the tourism and hospitality-related industry running at 33.2% (HKIHRM, 2018), compared to the average in Hong Kong of 11.2%, which highlights the importance of employee retention. Thus, we seek to advance the understanding of the significant stabilizing and destabilizing factors affecting turnover intention of travel agency frontline staff in Hong Kong, and to compare the perceptions of frontline staff and managers toward factors affecting the former's decision to stay or leave. Stabilizing and destabilizing factors are the favourable and unfavourable attributes of the working environment that increase/decrease employees' turnover intention respectively (Choi et al., 2011). It is essential to ensure a balance between organizational strengths (stabilizing factors) and enervation (destabilizing factors) to promote staff retention (Mano-Negrin & Kirschenbaum, 1999).

The tourism and hospitality industry generates 10% of the world's GDP, or one in every 10 jobs and 30% of world trade in services (UNWTO, 2018). It is also one of the four key pillar industries in Hong Kong (Census and Statistics Department, 2018), and the lifeblood of tourism due to its labour intensity. However, job vacancies surged 55.3% to 977 during 2016–2018 and a majority (83%) were supervisory and operative positions (VTC, 2019), signalling both a high employee turnover rate and a serious shortage of frontline employees. While part-time staff can address the high turnover, casual employment is not a panacea because part-time workers have low organizational commitment, are less reliable and have a high intention to leave (Davidson & Wang, 2011). Therefore, full-

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time employees should be valued, and the root causes of their withdrawal behaviour determined, in order to enhance employee retention and achieve a sustainable competitive advantage (Taylor, 2018).

Employee turnover continues to garner debate owing to its impact on operational effectiveness, service quality, and profitability (e.g. Li et al., 2017). Being labour intensive, the tourism and hospitality industry (including travel agents) faces a perennial challenge of employee turnover (Xu et al., 2018). Frontline staff, such as travel consultants, tour guides, and escorts provide services with a high level of customer contact and service encounter (Lamont et al., 2018). They help gain organizational competitive edge, improve organizational performance, and improve profitability by enhancing customer loyalty (Coelho & Henseler, 2012). A key success factor in the tourism industry is the assurance of a continuous supply of high calibre staff to ensure customer satisfaction and organizational development (McPhail et al., 2015).

The foregoing requires a good understanding of the specific factors driving employee intention to leave, while avoiding a one-size-fits-all single set of HR practices. Each sector and company should ideally develop HR strategies suitable for their particular circumstances (Kusluvan et al., 2010). However, travel agency-specific research remains relatively limited despite the burgeoning literature on employee turnover in tourism. Possible exceptions include quantitative studies such as Kim's (2014) comparison of 'neophyte' and 'veteran' turnover intention, Pang et al.'s (2014) investigation of the controllable and uncontrollable factors of turnover intention and Kim et al.'s (2012) examination of career commitment and turnover intention during global economic crises. To the best of our knowledge, there is no in-depth qualitative study of employee turnover in Hong Kong travel agencies.

There are many triggers for employee turnover intention, and a key one is the possible divergent perceptions managers and employees have towards workplace practices, norms and expectations (Stavrou & Ierodiakonou, 2016). This perception gap may also create a divide between how management values employee retention initiatives and how value translates into meaningful practices. Without examining the divergent perspectives, erroneous assumptions would weaken employee retention efforts (Marvel, 2017; Pereira et al., 2016). Despite the extensive research on voluntary turnover, most studies focus on employees' perceptions (Akgunduz & Bardakoglu, 2017; Kara et al., 2018). Thus, researchers have called for research on employee turnover perception at different hierarchical organizational levels (Lu et al., 2016). That notwithstanding, what remains underexplored is the possible disconnection between frontline staff and management over the employee turnover/retention determinants. This is a significant omission since it is recognized that perceptual dissimilarity on turnover antecedents between managers and subordinates is likely to influence employees' turnover and retention (Stavrou & Ierodiakonou, 2016). Therefore, we investigated the factors affecting turnover intention while simultaneously comparing the perceptions of frontline staff and managers. We sought to enhance understanding of these potential incongruences and to determine how Hong Kong travel agencies might improve their employee retention and minimize dysfunctional turnover. In the sections below, we review the relevant literature, present the study and model to demonstrate the paper's key contributions, and conclude with some suggestions for further research.

2. Literature review

Being influenced by several factors, turnover intention is the tendency to stay or quit and serves as a powerful predictor of actual leaving behaviour (Li et al., 2017). Strong turnover intention signals job attitude and morale change mirrored by absenteeism, low productivity, and customer service quality (Kang et al., 2018). Turnover scholars have explained employee withdrawal behaviour from different foci. For example, Mobley's (1977) Intermediate Linkage Model delineates the employee turnover process in a sequence of psychological steps, from evaluating the existing work, evaluation of new job, to the decision to quit or stay. Others have subsequently examined the turnover antecedents and consequences of dysfunctional turnover. Voluntary and dysfunctional turnover leads to loss of

skills and knowledge, high operating costs, and has a negative effect on employee productivity, service quality, and customer experience (Xu et al., 2018). One study found that the costs of replacing an operational staff were as high as US\$8,600 (Davidson et al., 2010). Scholars have examined the stabilizing and destabilizing forces that drive employee intention to leave or remain in other service industry sectors (eg Choi et al., 2011; Osuji et al., 2014). Some conclude that stabilizing attributes include co-worker relationships, management leadership and support, financial incentives, professional development, recognition and sense of professionalism whereas destabilizing factors include unfavourable working environment, inadequate staffing and ineffective management (Choi et al., 2011; Frye et al., 2020; Osuji et al., 2014). To our knowledge, no study to date has examined stabilizing and destabilizing factors in the travel agency industry. This paper thus addresses a significant gap in the literature. We argue that if managers can determine the trigger points of employees and their driving forces for voluntary turnover, organizations can formulate more effective retention policies and reduce dysfunctional turnover.

2.1. Turnover antecedents

Numerous hospitality and tourism studies have investigated the antecedents influencing voluntary turnover and manpower shortage, and scholars have increasingly focused on how job nature and individuals' career interests are correlated with turnover intention (LaLopa, 1997; Lo et al., 2014; Van Iddekinge et al., 2011). Interesting and challenging jobs counterbalance the disadvantages (e.g. unsociable hours and poor pay) suffered by hospitality employees (Weaver, 2009). Monotony in job content and intensive customer contact has a strong positive association with voluntary turnover (Houge Mackenzie & Kerr, 2013). More recently, researchers have considered the relationship between employee turnover and career continuity due to market turmoil (Kim et al., 2012). Researchers have observed that employees with excessive and uneven distribution of workloads have a high tendency to quit the job (e.g. Kucukusta et al., 2014; Wright, 2019). Some studies show that monetary factors, such as remuneration packages, are linked to job satisfaction and turnover (Frye et al., 2020; Lillo-Bañuls & Casado-Díaz, 2014); while others argue that the effect of monetary factors is not as important as compensation theorists have suggested (Milkovich & Newman, 2017). For example, Lam (2013) found that Hong Kong is the only Asian city that ranks job security higher than salary. Some studies observed an inverse relationship between perceived industry/career prospect and employee turnover in the hospitality industry (Qiu et al., 2014). Employees believe they can increase their income and staff benefit, improve their job security, and strengthen their power and status through promotion, consequently reducing their intention to leave (Haldorai et al., 2019). Research also shows that employees' satisfaction with supervisors and co-workers is negatively correlated with turnover intention (Kang et al., 2015). Studies on hotels in Mainland China (Wong & Wong, 2013) and Macau (Li et al., 2017) have consistently concluded that harmonious relationships with immediate supervisors and peers reduce intention to quit. Researchers have also found a link between applicability of acquired skills and job satisfaction and a reduction in turnover intention, thus improving the retention (Choi et al., 2015; Huang & Su, 2016). For others, the extent of employee acceptance of organizational culture and norms influences intention to quit or remain (Chen & Zhang, 2009). Controversial policies such as monetary penalties often become ineffectual, and end up damaging employee morale and triggering voluntary employee turnover (Bugdol, 2018). Also, stress tolerance was found to vary with the individual and depends on one's personality, motivation, ability, and experience (Tsaur & Tang, 2012). Factors contributing to high stress levels of frontline staff in the hospitality and tourism industry include emotional labour (Sohn & Lee, 2016), customer misbehaviour, demands, and expectations (Karatepe, 2011), employee-customer/employer interaction, communication difficulties, poor working environment and wages (Houge Mackenzie & Kerr, 2013), work-family conflict, long working hours, work shifts, anti-social working hours (Zhao & Ghiselli, 2016), and burnout (Chiang & Liu, 2017). One study revealed a strong relationship between perceived organizational prestige and hotel employees' turnover intention (Akgunduz & Bardakoglu, 2017).

Organization prestige is the belief employees hold about how people judge themselves. Employees who hold high organizational prestige are more willing to remain in order to extend the sense of prestige and self-esteem that derives from the organization even while earning below the market rate (Al-Sakarnah & Alhawary, 2009).

2.2. Gap between manager–subordinate’s expectations and perceptions

Stavrou and Ierodiakonou (2016) found that dissimilar job expectations and perceptions between managers and subordinates influence employee retention, motivation, and absenteeism, but managers have a misconception regarding the factors driving withdrawal and staying intention. Several reasons account for the perceptual incongruence between managers and subordinates, such as communication practices (Schnake et al., 1990), job characteristics (Evans et al., 2002), HR practices, and demographic difference (Lu et al., 2016). In addition, a perceived contravention of the psychological contract between employers and employees in job-related dimensions (e.g. job security, intra-organizational mobility, work–life balance, and autonomy) may trigger a propensity to leave, and actual turnover (Lub et al., 2012).

2.3 . Research objectives

In seeking to investigate gap identified in the foregoing, we were guided by the following questions:

- 1: What stabilizing and destabilizing factors affect turnover intention of frontline staff working for Hong Kong travel agencies?
- 2: How do these identified stabilizing and destabilizing factors differ between managers and frontline staff?

3. Methodology

We conducted an inductive study through semi-structured interviews that would allow the informants to tell the stories of their lived experience and thus enable us to unravel the ‘main story’ (Strauss, 1987). Our research strategy was guided by the notion of ‘understanding’, which, according to Hollis (1994), works best through a qualitative approach that seeks to capture in-depth knowledge as opposed to a snapshot at a point in time (see also Ragin, 1994). We used purposive sampling to select respondents and subsequently invited them through professional connections, complemented by a snowball effect. The sample population of this study was divided into two groups: frontline staff and managers working full-time in inbound/outbound travel agencies. Frontline staff worked as tour guides, tour escorts, and travel consultants. For the purposes of this study, managers are regarded as management and supervisory-level staff with at least one subordinate working with them. In the context of travel agencies, they tend to be designated as supervisors, officers, managers, executives, general managers, and presidents or equivalent positions.

We first developed an exploratory and open-ended interview guide based on our research questions, tested it with two pilot respondents, a manager, and a frontline staff, then refined it accordingly, culminating in 32 interviews (16 manager–frontline staff dyads from 16 companies) during a five-month period in 2016. Frontline staff were asked about their intention to stay with the current company, career plan if they quit, reasons triggering their contemplation to leave or stay, the company’s approach to addressing the turnover problem, and staff retention policies they liked and disliked. Managers were asked about the average service tenure of their subordinates, reasons they believed led subordinates to think of leaving and staying, current strategies to address the turnover and retention problem, and major hurdles to implementing staff retention initiatives. The interviewer ensured thorough probing as appropriate, and maintained detailed notes and reflections on each interview. See Appendix 1 for a summary of the interview guide. All the interviews were conducted face-to-face in Cantonese and lasted for approximately one hour. Sampling was completed when theoretical saturation was achieved and no additional data could be found (Glaser & Strauss, 1968).

Following Gibbs (2007), all the interviews were audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed, translated, and checked against the original recordings and accompanying notes by the first author and verified by an independent researcher with no connection to the study. The transcripts were then sent to the informants for validation or amendment (if any) to ensure the accuracy of transcripts, then analysed thematically (Kolbe & Burnett, 1991). The analysis started from open coding and ended with selective coding. A line-by-line coding approach was adopted for open coding targeted at studying the data closely and banishing preconception (Flick, 2009). The transcripts and coded data were then reviewed by the second author. Following standard analytical protocol, we both went through several iterations, refining, cross-checking the codes against the original transcripts and if necessary the audio-recordings, checking for both verification and contradiction, and reclassifying as appropriate (eg Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). Our inductive analytical method thus sought to capture the perceptions of the interviewees via an iterative approach that lends itself to theory building rather than theory testing (Dyer & Wilkins, 1991).

4. Findings and discussions

Four key thematic categories emerged from our analysis: (1) job nature, (2) industry factors, (3) organizational factors, and (4) personal factors. These are summarized in Figure 1 which forms the basis of our discussion below. First, we summarize the respondent profiles then discuss the four key themes with reference to the literature reviewed above, thus setting out clearly the contribution of this paper.

4.1. Respondent profiles

As illustrated in Table 1, the number of female manager respondents was more than twice that of males. Middle-aged individuals in their 50s outnumbered the younger respondents in their 20s and 40s (50s: 12; 20s–40s: 4). Over 60% of the respondents worked as assistant or general managers and 40% as middle and first-line managers. Participants working for small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) with 6–49 employees represented 56% of the total respondents. Over half of the front-line staff participants were female. The participants' age ranged from 20 to 56 or above, and the majority fell into the 20–29 and 35–39 age ranges. Most participants had completed secondary or post-secondary education. All received a monthly salary of HK\$10,001–20,000 (approximately US \$1280–2560), regardless of their job nature, which is considered relatively unattractive in the high-cost economy.

4.2. Stabilizing (SF) and destabilizing factors (DF) of job change

While our qualitative approach investigated perceptions and the sense our respondents made of the phenomenon, a quick summary of the importance of generated sub-factors was helpful by counting the frequency of occurrence and comparing the views reported by the two groups of respondents. Comparing the factors affecting job change perceived by managers and employees is helpful in improving staff retention programme and increasing employee job satisfaction. The findings identified the eight most critical factors that are viewed as stabilizing factors (SFs) and destabilizing factors (DFs) of job change perceived by both groups: (1) high customer contact, (2) anti-social working hours, (3) working environment, (4) office location, (5) supervisor–subordinate relations, (6) co-worker relations, (7) remuneration, and (8) career prospect. Figure 1 summarizes the key categories and sub-factors of the stabilizing and destabilizing factors of job change. The black boxes indicate the most important factors, and the grey boxes denote the new factors that have been ignored in existing studies.

4.2.1. Job nature

Our analysis yielded four factors connected to job nature: high customer contact, monotony, career continuity, and anti-social working hours. Managers and frontline staff agreed that a high level of

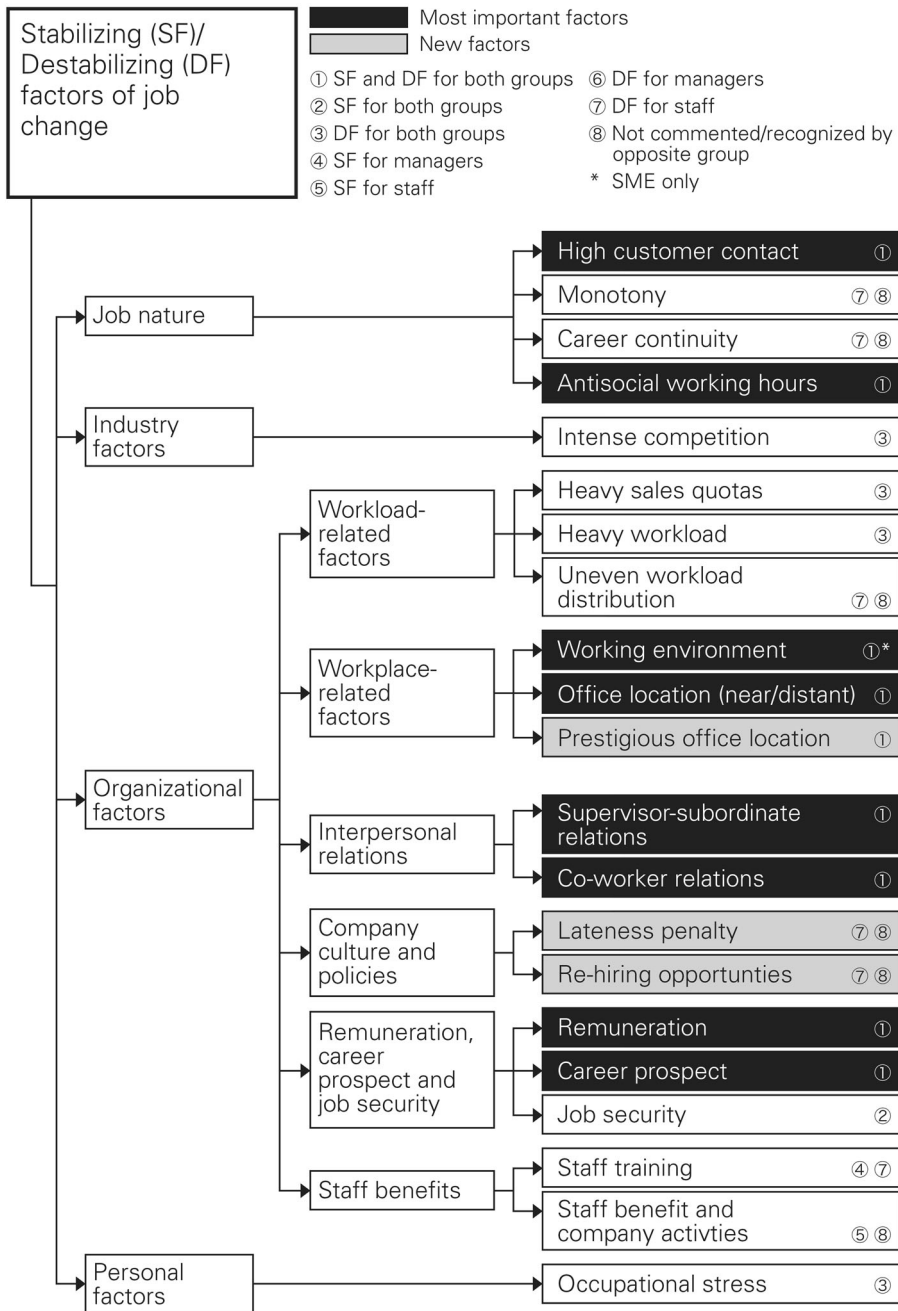


Figure 1. Schematic diagram comparing SF and DF of job change between managers and employees.

customer contact could be both a stabilizer and destabilizer of job change. Employees unhappy with excessive customer contact may want to quit, whereas those who enjoy accumulating knowledge through communication may stay longer. ‘They are weary of dealing with different kinds of customers because of their endless questions and annoying attitude ...’ (Manager 05). This view of job nature as a double-edged sword has been observed in the literature. For example, Weaver (2009) found that desirable job nature balances out the restraining working conditions and effects on

Table 1. Profile of manager and frontline staff respondents ($n = 32$).

Variable	Manager respondents		Frontline staff respondents	
	Number	Summary statistics	Number	Summary statistics
<i>Gender</i>				
Male	5	31.3%	7	43.7%
Female	11	68.7%	9	56.3%
<i>Age</i>				
20–24	0	0%	3	18.7%
25–29	1	6.3%	4	25%
30–34	0	0%	1	6.3%
35–39	1	6.3%	3	18.7%
40–49	2	12.5%	2	12.5%
50–55	7	43.8%	2	12.5%
56 or above	5	31.1%	1	6.3%
<i>Education</i>				
Secondary	7	43.8%	8	50%
Post-secondary	5	31.3%	7	43.7%
University	3	18.8%	1	6.3%
Post-graduate	1	6.1%	0	0%
<i>Position</i>				
Supervisor	1	6.2%		
Manager	5	31.3%		
Assistant General Manager/General Manager	10	62.5%		
Travel Consultant			10	62.5%
Tour Guide			4	25%
Tour Escort			2	12.5%
<i>Company size</i>				
Less than 5	2	12.5%	2	12.5%
6–49	9	56.3%	9	56.3%
50–100	2	12.5%	2	12.5%
101 or above	3	18.7%	3	18.7%
<i>Income</i>				
HK\$10,001–20,000	5	31.3%	16	100%
HK\$20,001–30,000	3	18.8%	0	0%
HK\$30,001–40,000	5	31.3%	0	0%
HK\$40,001 or above	3	18.6%	0	0%
<i>Company experience</i>				
Less than 1 year	1	6.3%	4	25%
1–2 years	0	0%	6	37.5%
3–4 years	0	0%	1	6.3%
5–6 years	5	31.3%	2	12.5%
Over 7 years	10	62.4%	3	18.7%
<i>Industry experience</i>				
Less than 1 year	0	0%	1	6.3%
1–2 years	0	0%	2	12.5%
3–4 years	0	0%	3	18.7%
5–6 years	0	0%	3	18.7%
Over 7 years	16	100%	7	43.8%
<i>Total work experience</i>				
Less than 1 year	0	0%	1	6.3%
1–2 years	0	0%	2	12.5%
3–4 years	0	0%	3	18.7%
5–6 years	0	0%	2	12.5%
Over 7 years	16	100%	8	50%

hospitality practitioners. Our findings also echo with Lo et al. (2014), Van Iddekinge et al. (2011), and LaLopa (1997) who argue that an individual's career interest is a powerful predictor of job selection and voluntary turnover in hospitality and tourism industry.

Seven frontline staff emphasized having a monotonous job as one of the biggest destabilizing factors, but managers did not recognize this idea. For example, one respondent (Frontline staff 06) reported that he had been in the industry for nearly two years, was exhausted by the tedious work, and wanted new challenges. This result ties in well with previous studies wherein a significant

positive correlation has been observed between boring and monotonous tasks and employee turnover (Houge Mackenzie & Kerr, 2013). Many travel industry workers leave because they fail to find a sense of belonging in the tourism industry, especially for those working outdoors. Another respondent observed that '... as employees grow older, they find that they no longer have the energy for this extremely demanding work' (Manager 12). Career discontinuity has been observed as a serious concern in the industry (Chiang & Liu, 2017), which has recently emerged as one of the most vulnerable following the double whammy of ongoing pro-democracy protests and Covid-19 outbreak. Staff in tourism-related industries have had to take annual leave and/or non-paid leave to drive down operating costs, leading to a high employee turnover (Tsang, 2020). It has been observed that less-educated employees with a lower sense of job security and perceived higher risk of job loss have a lower quit intention when job openings are relatively scarce during economic contraction (Artz & Kaya, 2015). Well-trained employees who have realized the vulnerability of the tourism-related industry may consider to leave when the economy recovers in order to avoid precarious employment. Our findings are contrary to Kim et al.'s (2012) study which indicated that travel agency employees in South Korea were inclined to stay with their company amid global economic crisis even when they felt insecure at work.

Both groups considered anti-social working hours as a destabilizer. Two managers mentioned that frontline staff must cope with emergencies even if they are off duty and during public holidays. 'My families have public holidays, and I couldn't attend our gatherings ... unless they change the date or postpone the time' (Frontline staff 11). Our result supports the finding that work-life conflict and undesirable work schedules drive employee turnover (Zhao & Ghiselli, 2016).

4.2.2. Industry factor

Managers and staff share convergent views on the effect of intense industry rivalry and competition on staff's intention to remain longer in this industry: '... Previously, the competition was limited among retail travel agencies. Rivalry among competitors has become more intense because diverse competitors, such as wholesale travel agencies, airlines, and online travel agencies, have entered the market' (Manager 02); 'Making a deal is becoming more difficult ... we are overburdened with workload' (Frontline staff 04). Disintermediation and fierce industry competition diminish employees' confidence in the travel trade industry and triggers turnover behaviour. This is consistent with prior findings of a significant relationship between perceived industry outlook and quit intention (Qiu et al., 2014).

4.2.3. Organizational factors

Organizational factors have branched out into six sub-factors as shown in Figure 1: (1) workload-related factors; (2) workplace-related factors; (3) interpersonal relations; (4) company culture and policies; (5) remuneration, career prospect, and job security; and (6) staff benefit. These factors are discussed below.

Workload-related factors tend to be a destabilizer that drives frontline staff to quit. The key driving forces generated from the interview data are sales quotas, workload, and uneven distribution of work. Six employee respondents reported that the stress comes from meeting tough sales targets. Other researchers have observed that employees with excessive and uneven distribution of workloads have a high tendency to quit Hong Kong's hospitality industry (e.g. Kucukusta et al., 2014; Wright, 2019). Our findings suggest another alarming situation in which the uneven workload distribution has become a destabilizing factor among frontline staff, which managers seem to ignore. This overlooked factor illustrates the incongruence of perceptions and the detrimental consequences it has for employee retention and turnover.

Ten out of 11 managers of SMEs were observed to willingly provide a harmonious and tolerant working environment for employees to create a cordial 'family' atmosphere as a potent tool to retain staff. Managers reported that they would hold birthday parties for the staff, offering traditional delicacies, such as mooncakes during the mid-autumn festival, as a bonus gift to show they care.

Another manager said ‘people will treat you the way you treat them ... be more empathetic to employees as they contribute to the company’ (Manager 06). This result aligns with previous studies wherein a harmonious working environment significantly influences employees’ intention to remain in the hospitality industry (Frye et al., 2020; Osuji et al., 2014; Wong & Wong, 2013).

Managers and staff acknowledge that a distant office location from home involving a long commute prevents people from staying. An additional stabilizing factor, which has been overlooked in the existing literature, is the effect of prestigious company locations. An employee mentioned that working in prominent landmark buildings in Hong Kong uplifts her self-esteem, and one manager from the same company reported:

It’s a common perception that a company located here is synonymous to success and solid financial capacity ... they (employees) enjoy working in the commercial center where (there are) good brands and celebrities gather. And people may really envy your working location where you have the chance to see celebrities in the flesh. (Manager 11)

Therefore, a prestigious company location is an important contributor to self-esteem that enhances employee retention. This finding aligns with prior findings that employees working for highly prestigious organizations have high self-esteem and low leaving intention even when the salary is less competitive (Akgunduz & Bardakoglu, 2017).

Managers and staff reported that supervisor–subordinate relations and co-worker relations may be a stabilizer and destabilizer that could accelerate intention to leave and enhance the bond an employee has with the company. As one manager (Manager 06) reported, staff leave ‘partly due to unsatisfied working environment where they could not work with their co-workers’. From the frontline staff perspective, managers often fail to provide constant support and understanding:

When something unexpected happens to you during a tour, you dare not inform the manager. If you let them know about this, they will give you merciless criticism, regardless of the fact that you had a hard time coping with the situation. (Frontline staff 13)

We believe that this situation reflects a poor leadership style that undermines employee trust, job satisfaction, and loyalty to the organization (Choi et al., 2011). Our position also echoes that of Frye et al. (2020), who contend that employees’ propensity to leave dwindles as perceived support from the manager and peer group increases.

We identified divergent perceptions on the culture of re-hiring employees: although management welcomes staff to re-join sometime after having resigned, employee from the same organization expressed disapproval with this practice.

I don’t like that the company keeps accepting them back into the team so easily. They should adhere to a higher standard than what is demanded from a fresh graduate given that these are staff with two to three years’ experience working in the field. (Frontline staff 15)

This re-hiring culture is a paradox. Although rehiring a qualified staff is more economical than recruiting new staff whose performance is uncertain, it can be a destabilizer for those intending to leave because it allows people to leave the company worry-free by assuring them of a ‘shelter’ in case they decide to return. The degree to which employees accept organizational culture and norms influences withdrawal/retention behaviour (Chen & Zhang, 2009). The employee re-hiring practice appears to be a destabilizer for existing staff because they perceive it as unfair to themselves if opportunities are usurped by the returnees.

Opinions are divided on penalty policy between the two groups. Managers view it as a disciplinary policy to penalize workers showing up late for work. Employees expressed their dissatisfaction with what they considered a harsh policy. These results align with the existing literature, which suggests that monetary punishment leads to an accurate task performance (Li et al., 2016). Although punishment promotes effective regulatory compliance, employees’ willingness to comply will decrease if the punishment is particularly unpleasant (Bugdol, 2018). Even worse, it may escalate to resentment, which can drive people to leave (Maertz et al., 2004). Two quotes illustrate the opposing views:

Employees arriving late for work must pay a fine of HK\$10 (US\$1.3) for every one minute, and there's no cap on the final amount ... That fine is unacceptable and should be abolished. (Frontline staff 11)

Employees who are cumulatively late for work beyond 30 minutes within a month will be recorded. A warning letter is issued every three records. After issuing three warning letters, the company has the right to dismiss the employee. (Manager 14)

Managers and frontline staff agreed unanimously that remuneration, career prospect, and job security were stabilizing and destabilizing factors of job change. '... people working in this industry take less than they give ... we don't have overtime payment, which I think is the norm in the tourism industry' (Manager 05). With two years of working experience, the median monthly salary for a travel consultant is eight percent lower than that of a shop assistant (US\$1780 vs. US\$1923) (InvestHK, 2018). This explains why the travel trade industry is less preferred among job seekers and is a common reason for young employees' short service tenure.

The results of our study identified an unexpected phenomenon regarding employees' attitude toward career prospects, which is that not everyone welcomed a promotion at work. One employee (Frontline staff 04) reported that he prefers to remain in his frontline position and relinquish promotional opportunities, a decision which reflects a tradeoff in the career structure between job nature and wages. Tour escorts work outdoors and are prone to rapid burnout but have opportunities to earn extra money from tips and commissions. Accepting promotions as first-line managers for stable-hour indoor jobs means the loss of lucrative tips and commissions. Another frontline employee (Frontline staff 15) reported that he is accustomed to adventure and meeting people, thereby explaining his reluctance to shift to the tedium of an office role. People expect a promotion to enjoy better pay; however, this increase can take years after moving indoors. Industry practitioners might need to adjust their approach toward promotion to avoid the frustration caused by false expectations.

Two factors were generated under staff benefit, ie, staff training and staff benefit and company activities. Our analysis shows divided perception toward the usefulness and efficiency of training among managers and frontline staff. Managers believe that they provide effective training to persuade employees to stay, but employees from the same organization considered inappropriate training a reason to quit.

I don't know how to apply the knowledge [acquired from training] to real-life practice and it becomes a waste of time that I have to make up for it by working overtime to finish my work after the training is over. (Frontline staff 13)

Our findings are consistent with Huang and Su (2016) and Choi et al. (2015) who find satisfaction in job training is impacted by the perceived compatibility between training knowledge and job requirements. We found no similarity between perception and expectation among employers and employees over training. Employees do not achieve post-training satisfaction because they expect job training to improve job performance, result in salary increase, and ensure promotion. By contrast, employers merely want performance improvement but are reluctant to provide further rewards. Huang and Su (2016) suggested that employees' satisfaction on job training promotes job satisfaction and decreases turnover intention. Therefore, the management must consider the usefulness and delivery approach when designing training.

Staff benefits and company activities are perceived by six employees as an important stabilizer for job change, but managers did not recognize them as such. The staff generally appreciate benefits such as Zongzi (rice dumpling), rice cakes during grand festivals, birthday leave, Chinese New Year red packets, and medical insurance. Moreover, the staff believe that social activities, such as travel incentives, dinners and after-work interest classes create an inviting and warm atmosphere and enhance loyalty. These results are consistent with those of previous studies suggesting that the total remuneration package is a significant tool to increase job satisfaction and retain high-caliber employees (Lillo-Bañuls & Casado-Díaz, 2014).

4.2.4. Personal factors

Staff respondents stated the following as their reasons for resigning: work stress caused by work overload, understaffing, excessive job responsibilities, demanding customers and supervisors, and the job itself. One employee reported being stressed out and agonizing at work as the company called for meetings twice a week to urge them to generate new business. A tour guide described her anxiety over something terrible that might happen to the tour group, thereby preventing them from making tour itineraries on time. Our findings echo previous studies about the stressful nature of emotional labour required of the tour leaders (Sohn & Lee, 2012). Service workers require high emotional intelligence to cope instantaneously with the demands of customers, co-workers, and superiors (Karatepe, 2011).

5. Conclusions, implications, and recommendations

We sought to advance the understanding of the significant factors affecting turnover intention of travel agency frontline staff in Hong Kong and to conduct a comparative study of turnover factors among frontline staff and managers. The stabilizing and destabilizing factors of job change were categorized into four themes: (1) job nature, (2) industry factors, (3) organizational factors, and (4) personal factors. Job withdrawal was primarily caused by high customer contact, anti-social working hours, working environment, office location, supervisor–subordinate relations, co-worker relations, remuneration, and career prospect. Moreover, managers and frontline staff have different views of turnover factors, such as tardiness penalty, re-hiring opportunities, and staff training. This paper raises important theoretical and practical implications, and is one of the few pioneering research projects using a qualitative approach in this field, thus making a novel contribution to the turnover literature by contrasting the perceptions of managers and frontline staff in a way that allowed them to tell the story of their ‘lived experience’. The analysis confirms the findings of previous studies about significant correlation between turnover intention and different variables (e.g. high customer contact (Houge Mackenzie & Kerr, 2013), anti-social working hours (Zhao & Ghiselli, 2016), working environment (Choi et al., 2011), office location (Akgunduz & Bardakoglu, 2017), supervisor/co-worker–relations (Kang et al., 2015), remuneration (Lillo-Bañuls & Casado-Díaz, 2014), and career prospect (Qiu et al., 2014)). It also reveals new evidence about the significance of office location, tardiness penalty and re-hiring opportunities which had not previously been recognized. By comparing the perceptual difference between managers and frontline staff, this study also identified dissimilarity across multiple stabilizing and destabilizing factors of job change. We presented a conceptual framework illustrating how stabilizing and destabilizing factors impact on the employee turnover process, as set out in Figure 1, which we hope will spur further research.

The disjuncture between expectations and perceptions of managers and frontline staff may constitute a potential barrier to employee retention. Employees likely recognize the perceptual divergence, but are excessively preoccupied with their workload. This situation seems irreconcilable. It is imperative for management to appreciate fully the factors that trigger dysfunctional employee turnover and find ways to address them. Being a perceptive and empathetic manager from the eyes of employees may ensure a satisfied workforce that may subsequently improve overall productivity and customer service quality. Managers should therefore initiate two-way communication with the staff to gain a full understanding of employee concerns and thus design effective and appropriate HR policies. To relieve work-related stress, managers should balance workload among staff members instead of following the tendency to over-burden a small number of employees. Effective and efficient training methods, which enhance expertise and meet employee needs, including online training, would be beneficial. Managers will need to exercise caution and communicate fully when implementing unpopular policies (e.g. financial penalties). Our findings reveal monotonous tasks drive employee withdrawal intention, therefore, job rotation might provide the

opportunity to gain new experience and enhance retention. This study has some limitations, such as the challenge of generalizability across populations. Nonetheless, we believe the methodology adopted allows generalizability across theoretical propositions and has hopefully identified avenues for further theorizing. Researchers may consider surveys to study the causality between the key variables, replicating the study in the context of online travel agencies or the travel trade industry in Mainland China, two sectors that are flourishing, but may experience serious labour shortages. Finally, we recommend that researchers and managers might consider policies and implications of retaining knowledge resources when employees should decide to leave.

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