

Employee Turnover: A Theoretical and Reflective Approach to the Phenomenon in the Brazilian Context*

Rotación de empleados: un enfoque teórico y reflexivo sobre el fenómeno en el contexto brasileño

Rotatividade de empregados: uma abordagem teórica e reflexiva sobre o fenômeno no contexto brasileiro

Wellington dos Santos Fortunato^a

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Pontifícia Universidade Católica do Rio de Janeiro, Brasil

wellington_fortunato@mst.iag.puc-rio.br

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5058-4989>

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Marcello Vinicius Doria Calvosa

Universidade Federal Rural do Rio de Janeiro, Brasil

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2724-9431>

Abstract:

Voluntary employee turnover presents a dichotomous nature. While it can foster innovation and structural renewal, it also leads to dysfunctions such as the loss of social capital and elevated recruitment costs. Through a qualitative literature review, presented as a theoretical essay, this study explores this phenomenon. The primary reflections encourage managers to consider turnover as a strategic indicator with multiple dimensions and dual impacts. The study proposes future research to simultaneously examine the positive and negative effects of this phenomenon and, subsequently, to investigate the moderating role of turnover rates and variations in the hierarchical level of employees who have resigned.

Code JEL: : J63, J60, M12

Keywords: Employee turnover, labor turnover, voluntary turnover, turnover intention.

Resumen:

La rotación voluntaria de empleados presenta una naturaleza dicotómica. Si bien puede fomentar la innovación y la renovación estructural, también conlleva a disfunciones como la pérdida de capital social y elevados costos de reclutamiento. A través de una revisión cualitativa de la literatura, presentada como un ensayo teórico, este estudio explora este fenómeno. Las reflexiones principales incitan a los gerentes a considerar la rotación como un indicador estratégico con múltiples dimensiones e impactos duales. El estudio propone investigaciones futuras para examinar simultáneamente los efectos positivos y negativos de este fenómeno y, posteriormente, para investigar el papel moderador de las tasas de rotación y las variaciones en el nivel jerárquico de los empleados que han renunciado.

Códigos JEL: J63, J60, M12

Palabras clave: Rotación del personal, rotación laboral, rotación voluntaria, intención de rotación.

Resumo:

A rotatividade voluntária de empregados revela-se dicotômica. Embora promova inovação e renovação estrutural, também acarreta disfunções como perda de capital social e elevados custos de recrutamento. Por meio de uma revisão qualitativa da literatura, apresentada como um ensaio teórico, este estudo explora esse fenômeno. As reflexões principais incentivam os gestores a considerar a rotatividade como um indicador estratégico com múltiplas dimensões e impactos duplos. O estudo propõe pesquisas futuras para examinar simultaneamente os efeitos positivos e negativos desse fenômeno e, subsequentemente, para investigar o papel moderador das taxas de rotatividade e das variações no nível hierárquico dos funcionários que se demitiram.

Códigos JEL: J63, J60, M12

Palavras-chave: Rotatividade de empregados, Rotatividade de funcionários, Rotatividade voluntária, Intenção de rotatividade.

Author notes

^a Autora de Correspondencia. Correo electrónico: wellington_fortunato@mst.iag.puc-rio.br

Introduction

Managing voluntary employee turnover is universally proclaimed as more challenging for managers and executives than other forms of leaving such as layoffs or terminations.

Source: Lee et al., 2018

Since the mid-20th century, researchers, managers, human resources professionals, and employers have examined the impacts of employee turnover (Bolt et al., 2022; Fortunato & Calvosa, 2024). To explain this phenomenon, various theoretical models have been applied (Hom et al., 2017). Among these, Social Exchange Theory, Conservation of Resources Theory, and Social Identity Theory are the most widely used in global studies (Bolt et al., 2022). Over the past five years, alternative frameworks have attracted attention, such as Emergent Context Turnover Theory (De Meulenaere et al., 2021), Person-Organization Fit (Malik et al., 2022), and Job Embeddedness (Peltokorpi & Allen, 2023). These approaches expand our understanding of the factors influencing employees' decisions to leave.

Although various theoretical lenses have been developed over the past century (Hom et al., 2017), voluntary turnover remains a complex phenomenon for managers and executives to grasp (Lee et al., 2028). Understanding this process is relevant for organizations, as evidence links it to higher costs (Santos & Santos, 2022; Moon et al., 2023), declines in financial metrics (Li et al., 2022; Stern et al., 2021), and reductions in service quality (Shin & Alam, 2022; Walumbwa et al., 2019). Conversely, studies show that the ability to retain qualified talent contributes to improved organizational performance (Souza et al., 2022). However, scientific production on turnover in Latin America and Brazil remains limited (Fortunato & Calvosa, 2024).

In light of the above, the following research question was formulated: What are the main impacts of voluntary employee turnover? The main objective of this study is to use the perspectives of senior researchers to trigger a theoretical discussion on employee turnover and critically examine the specific effects of voluntary turnover. In order to achieve the objectives of the research - and present the main aspects of the rotation theme of employees to young researchers, administrators and HR managers - a qualitative study was used. For a better exposition of the theme, we opted for a theoretical essay, considering that the scientific researches that mention the theme of turnover do not usually point out the ambidextrous impacts (positive and negative) of the phenomenon with critical perspective to bring more reflective theoretical discussions about organizational practices.

This essay is relevant to broaden the understanding of employee turnover in organizations, both by the significant participation of turnover studies in the field of HR management (Lee et al., 2017; Soares et al., 2022), as to the emphasis given to the 'turnover' phenomenon due to its organizational impacts (Maertz et al., 2023; Moon et al., 2023; Li et al., 2022). As for the originality of this work, in May 2025, no research was found in the databases Scopus, Redalyc, Scielo and Portal de Periódicos CAPES that addressed the issue of employee turnover, their main theories and impacts together in the form of a theoretical essay.

Methods

This study adopted a qualitative approach, anchored in a literature review (Gil, 2021), with the purpose of deepening the theoretical understanding about the impacts of voluntary employee turnover. When choosing a theoretical essay, the focus was on the critical articulation of existing concepts and approaches. This form of presentation, more reflective than descriptive (Meneghetti, 2011), enables a discussion on the functional and dysfunctional effects of voluntary turnover, offering a conceptual framework for future empirical work and for the formulation of retention strategies. Research was conducted in the databases Scopus, Redalyc, SciELO and Portal de Periódicos CAPES to extract peer-reviewed articles published preferably between 2015 and 2024. To broaden the coverage of the research, we also explored the 100 management and psychology journals - journals that most publish on the subject (Seidl et al., 2019; Steil et al., 2019) - with the highest H index in Google Scholar in Portuguese language in May 2025, namely: Revista de Administração Pública

(RAP), Estudos de Psicologia, Revista de Administração de Empresas (RAE), Psicologia: Ciência e Profissão, Revista de Administração Contemporânea (RAC), Cadernos EBAPE. BR, Revista Psicologia. Organizações e Trabalho (RPORT), Psico-USF, Revista de Administração Mackenzie (RAM), and Psicologia: Teoria e Pesquisa.

The research strategy combined the keywords: “Turnover”, “voluntary turnover”, “The Great Resignation”, and “turnover intention” in English, Portuguese, and Spanish. After eliminating duplicates and discarding studies that did not align with the research objectives, the authors applied inclusion criteria: (a) publication in an international journal of the first quartile “Q1”, according to the Scimago Journal & Country Rank (SJR, 2024) and (b) classification in stratum “A” in the 2017-2020 evaluation of Qualis CAPES - Coordenação de Aperfeiçoamento de Pessoal de Nível Superior (Plataforma Sucupira, 2024). The literature review obtained 70 articles that met all criteria and performed a detailed analysis. The extracted data were categorized thematically to reveal information on theoretical foundations and distinguish between ambidextrous effects (functional and dysfunctional) of voluntary turnover.

Employee turnover: Overview

Voluntary turnover, defined as the intentional severance of employment ties by employees (Hom et al., 2017), is a critical phenomenon engaging academics, researchers, and HR professionals (Fortunato & Calvosa, 2024; Moon et al., 2023). Consequently, it has been the subject of considerable recent investigation. Due to the inherent difficulty in collecting data on actual separations, many studies utilize turnover intention as a widely accepted proxy for predicting voluntary turnover. While acknowledging that these terms are not synonymous, this study treats them as closely related concepts, as their distinction does not significantly alter the theoretical analysis of the phenomenon’s impacts. Building on these foundational concepts, the subsequent section presents secondary data that provide a global overview of voluntary turnover.

In 2024, Page Group – a people management consultancy – reported that approximately 47% of the global workforce plans to leave their jobs (Page Group, 2025). In Brazil, a survey by Robert Half Talent Solutions – the world’s leading specialized recruitment firm – indicates that 50% of qualified professionals are seeking new opportunities. Of these, 64% aim for career growth, intending to change employers while remaining in the same economic sector (Robert Half Talent Solutions, 2024). To illustrate these findings, Table 1 presents indicators from ten countries across Europe, North America, and South America. It highlights voluntary turnover rates, turnover intention rates, and the three primary reasons why talent choose to stay with (or leave) their organizations.

TABLE 1.
Characteristics of voluntary turnover in 10 countries

Continent	Country	1/	% TI ²	3 main reasons why talent choose
Europe	France	6	52	Work-life balance; Job satisfaction; Mental health
	Ireland	16	67	Work-life balance; Job satisfaction; Mental health
	Italy	6	55	Work-life balance; job satisfaction; Mental health
	United Kingdom	25	47	Work-life balance; Job satisfaction; A good salary
North	United States	15	37	Work-life balance; A good salary; Mental health
	Mexico	15	51	Work-life balance; A good salary; Job satisfaction
South	Argentina	15	51	Work-life balance; A good salary; Job satisfaction
	Brazil	13	57	Work-life balance; A good salary; Job satisfaction
	Colombia	15	57	Work-life balance; Mental health; Job satisfaction
	Peru	30	58	Work-life balance; A good salary; Job satisfaction

1/ Voluntary Turnover Rate.

2/ Turnover Intention Rate.

Source: Adapted from Menezes-Filho & Narita (2025), Lara AI (2024), Page Group (2025), and Robert Half Talent Solutions (2024).

The Table 1 data reveal significant variations within and between continents. In Europe, France and Italy report low voluntary turnover (6%) and high turnover intention (52–55%). In these countries, the top three reasons for choosing or rejecting an employer are identical. In the United Kingdom, despite higher voluntary turnover (25%), turnover intention falls to 47%, with compensation among the top three reasons. In the US and Mexico, both record 15 % voluntary turnover and intentions of 37% and 51%, respectively, sharing the same three motivations. In South America, Argentina and Colombia show 15% voluntary turnover and 51–57% intention. Peru stands out with 30% voluntary turnover.

In Brazil, 13% voluntary separations accompany 57% turnover intention. These results suggest that the Brazilian context requires strategies combining work-life balance, fair compensation, and well-being promotion. Except in Colombia, competitive salary ranks among the top three reasons why talent choose or reject their employer across all regions. After this overview of turnover, a deeper understanding requires exploring the most commonly used theories to study the phenomenon. This analysis will enable emerging researchers to grasp the diversity of available frameworks and to select the approach best suited to their future research objectives.

What are the most cited or addressed theories in studies of the phenomenon?

Historically, research on employee turnover, prior to the mid-20th century, largely lacked a strong theoretical foundation (Hom et al., 2017; Lee et al., 2017). This changed significantly with James March and Herbert Simon's seminal work in 1958, which introduced the first formal theory on employee turnover. Their work outlined potential motivations and factors influencing employees' decisions to leave or remain with organizations (Hom et al., 2017), effectively catalyzing the topic's increasing popularity in the USA and worldwide (Lee et al., 2017). As Porter et al.'s (2019) meta-analysis explains, a wide range of theories have since been developed to elucidate why employees choose to leave an organization. According to a recent systematic review by Bolt et al. (2022), the most commonly used theories in turnover studies are, respectively, Social Exchange Theory, Conservation of Resources, and Social Identity Theory. Despite their individual peculiarities, these theories are often applied for similar purposes in turnover studies due to their complementary characteristics, as further detailed in Table 2.

TABLE 2.
Most cited theories in the history of turnover

Theory	Main characteristics	Basis
Social Exchange	Process of reciprocal two-way exchange between employer and employee. Characterized by a set of transactions, interdependent and consecutive, in which both parties are motivated by their own interests.	Serenko (2024)
Conservation of Resources	Individuals are driven to conserve the resources they possess and consistently seek to expand them, in addition to having an aversion to the risk of losing what they have gained.	Becker et al. (2023)
Social Identity	Sense of integration of employees with the organizations they belong to, in which there is strong identification with the mission, values, culture, and vision of the organization.	Wikhamn et al. (2021)

Source: Developed from Serenko (2024); Becker et al. (2023); Wikhamn et al. (2021).

The Table 2 highlights the main characteristics of Social Exchange Theory, Conservation of Resources Theory, and Social Identity Theory. It is relevant to note that all these theories emphasize a transactional relationship of resources between employees and organizations. This exchange can be perceived through integration, based on shared values and visions. In this context, these theories are usually applied in isolation or predominantly in research, such as Serenko's study (2024). However, some studies choose to combine and integrate these theories, like the combination of Social Exchange and Social Identity theories (Wikhamn et al., 2021) or Social Exchange and Conservation of Resources theories (Bajaba et al., 2022). Additionally, there are research projects that integrate one of these three theories with others to enhance the understanding of the employee turnover phenomenon (Oliveira et al., 2019).

The Social Exchange Theory (SET), developed by Peter M. Blau in 1964, emphasizes reciprocal exchange relationships of resources among individuals (Blau, 1964). This theory is recognized as the most widely used theoretical framework in analyzing employee turnover worldwide (Bolt et al., 2022). Social Exchange, when applied to turnover studies, aims to highlight the employer-employee perception regarding synergy and organizational balance (Serenko, 2024). From the perspective of reciprocal exchange between obligations and rewards, this theory is based on continuous trust and long-term explicit or implicit agreements (Hom et al., 2009). This approach is consistently employed to explain both actual turnover (Serenko, 2024) and employees' turnover intention (Bajaba et al., 2022; Oliveira et al., 2019).

Therefore, it is believed that the SET can provide significant insights into possible associations between employee turnover, investment in personnel hiring, and organizational cost reduction. In national studies, considering the peculiarities of the Brazilian labor market (Amorim et al., 2021; Amorim et al., 2023; Beccaria & Maurizio, 2020), the application of this theory can reveal relevant connections between the type of contractual bond in private organizations (outsourced, legal entity, or CLT) and turnover, as the hiring model can impact turnover rates (Oliveira & Najnudel, 2023; Soares et al., 2022). This theory can also help identify potential relationships between turnover and benefits offered by organizations, such as flexibility in working hours, as it is believed that telecommuting can influence employee retention (Carvalho Neto, 2020).

In 1989, Stevan E. Hobfoll developed the Conservation of Resources Theory (COR) to examine the cause-and-effect relationships between individuals and stressors (Hobfoll, 1989). This theory ranks second among the most used to examine employee turnover (Bolt et al., 2022). Conservation of Resources has been applied to analyze contexts of conflict or confrontations and the departure of talented employees, such as job insecurity (Peltokorpi & Allen, 2023), or the work-family conflict and turnover intention (Bajaba et al., 2022; Rubenstein et al., 2020). Given these characteristics, Conservation of Resources can offer valuable insights into the understanding of administrators and HR managers in complex work situations, such as the dynamics between abusive supervisors and subordinates, as this dynamic can impact talent departure (Oliveira & Najnudel, 2023).

Considering the context of the Brazilian labor market (Amorim et al., 2021; Amorim et al., 2023; Beccaria & Maurizio, 2020), applying the Conservation of Resources Theory can contribute to understanding

employee perceptions in unique organizational situations, such as the privatization of a company, as in this situation, public servants may become insecure about their current employability and future working conditions. Furthermore, this theory can help understand the phenomenon of employee turnover in contemporary business models that provide new stressors for employees, such as professional motorcyclists and cyclists who make deliveries through delivery app platforms (Costa et al., 2023). Similarly, the theory can be applied to current contexts, such as the reconciliation between the personal and professional lives of women in the telecommuting scenario, as this work model can result in an overload of tasks and domestic responsibilities, influencing turnover (Aguilar et al., 2023).

Developed by Henri Tajfel and John C. Turner in 1986, Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 2004) is the third most frequently used theoretical framework for analyzing employee turnover (Bolt et al., 2022). When applied to turnover studies, this theory aims to examine the construction of employees' social identity, particularly their sense of participation and belonging within the company (Wikhamn et al., 2021). Thus, Social Identity Theory is employed to enhance processes related to the entry and retention of qualified employees, as demonstrated by its use in analyzing the impacts of recruiting former entrepreneurs into organizations (Feng et al., 2022). Considering the nuances of the Brazilian labor market (Amorim et al., 2021; Amorim et al., 2023; Beccaria & Maurizio, 2020), applying Social Identity Theory can deepen our understanding of employees' immersion, adaptation, and sense of belonging, thereby aiding in the comprehension of turnover processes. This theory can help understand the relationship between employee turnover and Mergers & Acquisitions (M&A) actions in organizations, as the union of two companies can often modify the cultural vision and characteristics of the new organization.

Beyond the aforementioned theoretical characteristics, more sophisticated and innovative theories have emerged over time to explain employee turnover (Hom et al., 2017). Recent theories, models, and approaches increasingly reveal that decisions to leave or remain in an organization are triggered by a wide range of social challenges and distinct psychological forces (Feng et al., 2022). This evolving understanding likely explains why, in the last five years, other theories have also been frequently utilized in employee turnover studies, as summarized in Table 3.

TABLE 3.
Theories Recently Used in Studies on Turnover

Theory	Main characteristics	Basis
Context-Emergent Turnover	Contextual factors, especially the size of the company, can lead to significant implications in coping with collective turnover, as depending on the organization's size, the resources available to manage the impacts caused by turnover are different.	De Meulenaere et al. (2021)
Person-Organization Fit	There is a continuous and dynamic process of employees adapting to work, an adjustment in which adapted employees seek to maintain correspondence with the organizational environment and actively mitigate the adverse effects caused by aspects that are misaligned.	Malik et al. (2022)
Job Embeddedness	Perception of the inter-relational dimensions between employees and organizations that occur within or outside of work.	Peltokorpi & Allen (2023)

Source: developed from De Meulenaere et al. (2021); Malik et al. (2022); Peltokorpi & Allen (2023).

From the Table 3, it is possible to infer that recent research on the turnover theme applies theories focused on the context and integration in the workplace. It is observed that current investigations use theories that align more with the Social Identity Theory (Wikhamn et al., 2021), as they seek to understand the insertion into work (Peltokorpi & Allen, 2023) and the fit of the employee in the organization (Malik et al., 2022). On the other hand, there is a considerable departure from theories that examine exchanges or conservations of resources between organizations and employees, for example, the Social Exchange Theory (Serenko, 2024) and the Conservation of Resources Theory (Becker et al., 2023). In addition to the emergence of specific theories to investigate turnover (De Meulenaere et al., 2021; Porter & Rigby, 2021), it is possible to observe the beginning of a movement in which research on employee turnover seeks to understand combinations of

organizational and professional characteristics, considering the peculiarities of contextual aspects involving labor relations.

The Context-Emergent Turnover (CET) Theory was developed by Anthony J. Nyberg and Robert E. Ployhart in 2013 (Nyberg & Ployhart, 2013). This theory explains that contextual factors, especially the size of the company, impact collective turnover coping (the departure of two or more employees in a short period), as the organization's size determines the resources available to manage the phenomenon (De Meulenaere et al., 2021). Therefore, the Context-Emergent Turnover is considered one of the most promising theoretical constructs for understanding the effects of turnover in organizations, as it considers both the size of the organization and the volume of talent departure. Furthermore, this theory suggests a negative association between collective turnover, performance, and organizational competitiveness (Walumbwa et al., 2019). Its potential also extends to the analysis of broader organizational aspects, such as the relationship between organizational climate and turnover (Iwai et al., 2023). In the Brazilian context, the Context-Emergent Turnover Theory can be highlighted as a valuable tool for analyzing turnover and the loss of organizational knowledge, especially in the education and health sectors, as knowledge can flow to other organizations (Oliva et al., 2022). Moreover, this theory can indicate significant organizational dysfunctions regarding employee satisfaction and quality of life at work, factors that impact both absenteeism and turnover (Barbosa et al., 2025; Beccaria & Maurizio, 2020; Calvosa, 2022).

The Person-Organization Fit Theory was formulated by Amy L. Kristof-Brown in 1996 (Kristof-Brown, 1996). This theory suggests that the behavior of professionals in the workplace is influenced by psychological interactions between employees and the organization (Malik et al., 2022), which are based on the congruence and compatibility of objectives, values, mission, vision, and organizational culture (Kristof-Brown, Schneider, & Su, 2023). When these characteristics are aligned, employees have their needs met and can achieve their goals related to job security and well-being. As a result, this can lead to an increase in commitment, engagement, and productivity (De Oliveira et al., 2022; De Winne et al., 2019) and, consequently, a decrease in talent turnover. Based on the presented information and considering the current challenges of the Brazilian labor market (Amorim et al., 2021; Amorim et al., 2023; Beccaria & Maurizio, 2020), the Person-Organization Fit Theory can be valuable when applied in studies aimed at analyzing the turnover intention of workers, especially those who are newly hired. It can also help understand the relationship between employee turnover and the mergers and acquisitions movement since the union of two companies often modifies the mission, vision, and culture of the new institution. Therefore, the use of this theory can be an important tool to assist administrators and HR managers in planning talent retention strategies.

The Job Embeddedness Theory was developed in 2001 by Terence R. Mitchell and colleagues (Mitchell et al., 2001). The concept of this theory consists of three dimensions: (i) employee and organization link; (ii) perceived cost and benefits lost through exits; and (iii) compatibility of the workplace and external organizational environments (Hom et al., 2009). This theory seeks to elucidate why people stay and, with that, explains why people leave. It is noteworthy that although the act of leaving seems to be the opposite of staying, the reasons for leaving and staying are not always antagonistic (Hom et al., 2017). Due to its comprehensiveness in the applicability in turnover phenomenon studies, the Job Embeddedness has gained strength in recent years as a valuable framework for understanding turnover intention (Bolt et al., 2022) and voluntary turnover decisions (Rubenstein et al., 2020). By analyzing citations on Google Scholar in May 2025, with the help of the Publish or Perish (PoP) software, it was found that the article that highlighted Job Embeddedness is one of the most referenced theoretical constructs, with over 5,270 citations (Mitchell et al., 2001). According to Rubenstein et al. (2018), the application of this theory is valuable to understand employees' perception of the organizational environment and interpersonal bonds between them. In the Brazilian context, the Job Embeddedness Theory can help understand voluntary turnover (employee resignation), especially in service sector companies. Due to these professional characteristics being able to influence employee turnover in organizations (Oliveira et al., 2019; Oliveira & Najnudel, 2023).

Other theories, even mentioned by experienced researchers, seem, until the publication of this essay, to have a secondary interest relationship with the theme. Among them are the Self-Determination Theory (Oliveira & Najnudel, 2023) and the Planned Behavior Theory (Peltokorpi et al., 2023). The Self-Determination Theory can be well employed in studies aimed at analyzing the communication of social information between leaders and their subordinates; this would help understand the organizational climate or bring relevant data on possible non-compliances in organizational flows and processes. On the other hand, the application of the Planned Behavior Theory would be better applied in studies that focus on turnover intention and seek to assist in problems of low productivity at work or would support studies on issues related to the evolution of sustainability and organizational competitiveness. After understanding the first formal theory applied in the study of turnover, traversing through the main theories applied in the phenomenon studies, and observing some of the most used theories in recent research, it is relevant to reflect on how employee turnover can impact organizations. Since employee turnover can cause both negative and positive organizational impacts in various contexts (Simón et al., 2023).

Impacts generated by voluntary employee turnover: Opportunities and challenges

Have you ever reflected on how employee turnover is experienced within an organization? Perceptions of this issue arise in conversations during both formal meetings and informal hallway exchanges, revealing diverse interpretations shaped by individual experiences. In this sense, turnover cannot be treated as a neutral event. It produces dichotomous effects that fluctuate between organizational gains and losses (Maertz et al., 2023). In certain situations, the voluntary departure of underperforming employees is perceived as positive, functioning as a self-regulation mechanism within the productive system (Trevor & Piyanontalee, 2020). The resignation of leaders with toxic behaviors can also open space for improving the organizational climate and strengthening collective productivity (Heleno et al., 2018; Iwai et al., 2023; Oliveira et al., 2019). Do you believe that a toxic leader can not only generate job dissatisfaction but also disrupt the work–life balance? If your answer is yes, a closer look at Table 1 might surprise you. Social exchange theory and person–organization fit theory help interpret these effects by suggesting that the dissolution of misaligned ties can restore balance in the employment relationship.

On the other hand, turnover can also lead to dysfunctional disruptions (Maertz et al., 2023). When talented professionals decide to leave, process continuity is compromised, service quality tends to decline (Walumbwa et al., 2022), and the organization's financial outcomes may suffer negative impacts (Li et al., 2022; Stern et al., 2021). In such cases, understanding the reasons behind employee departures requires alternative analyses and theoretical lenses. Table 1 provides an overview of voluntary turnover across different geographical contexts, highlighting exit rates, turnover intentions, and the factors that influence whether talented employees choose to stay with or leave the organization. Theories such as Conservation of Resources (COR) Theory and Job Embeddedness Theory are particularly helpful here. They explain how the perception of loss –whether in terms of recognition, support, or growth opportunities– can lead to voluntary exit. Given this complexity, an inevitable question emerges: How can one interpret a phenomenon that operates in opposite directions within the same organization?

Part of the answer lies in understanding that the effects of turnover are not absolute but are moderated by contextual variables. The turnover rate and the hierarchical level of departing employees are factors that directly influence organizational outcomes (Li et al., 2025; Simón et al., 2023). Organizations operate under distinct rhythms, and their flows of human capital reflect specific strategies and cultures. Li et al. (2025) argue that in contexts of moderate voluntary turnover –especially when below the organizational average– the departure of some employees can stimulate innovation, even in the absence of advanced human resource

management practices. Still, it is essential to consider who is leaving. The loss of leaders tends to generate cascading effects, as these individuals exert influence over their teams. This dynamic can lead to what is known as turnover contagion, in which one employee's departure influences others to do the same (Porter & Rigby, 2021). In more intense situations, this becomes a case of collective turnover, as proposed by the Context-Emergent Turnover Theory (Nyberg & Ployhart, 2013). Thus, understanding turnover requires more than labeling it as positive or negative; it calls for a contextualized analysis, attentive to interpersonal ties and the systems that support retention or departure within organizations.

Building on the previous points and reflections, this essay now turns to a more focused discussion on the organizational effects of voluntary turnover. The choice is made to begin with functional effects, as –despite being acknowledged in the literature– they are less explored when compared to dysfunctional impacts (Simón et al., 2023). This choice broadens the analytical scope and encourages less conventional reflections on the potential contributions of turnover to organizational renewal, team strengthening, and the reconfiguration of work relationships. The text then moves on to address the dysfunctional effects, which are widely discussed in the literature and frequently encountered in organizational practice (Bolt et al., 2022), offering a critical analysis of the loss of human capital, process discontinuity, and harm to organizational culture.

What are the main positive impacts produced by Voluntary Employee?

Voluntary turnover does not always imply a loss for the organization. In certain contexts, it can actually serve as a mechanism for workforce adjustment, renewal, and strengthening (Li et al., 2025; Maertz et al., 2023; Hekman et al., 2022). Low-performing employees tend to resign to avoid demotions or because they perceive a misalignment with their job roles (Simón et al., 2022). Such situations are common: Who has never considered leaving an organization after realizing that their personal values were at odds with the corporate culture? This type of decision can be understood through the lenses of Social Identity Theory and Person-Organization Fit Theory. These theories explain how a misalignment between an individual and their work environment fosters voluntary turnover (Kristof-Brown, 1996; Tajfel & Turner, 2004). In these instances, turnover contributes to a better alignment between profiles and roles, reduces internal conflict, and enhances overall cohesion. This ultimately creates more favorable conditions for employee engagement (Simón et al., 2022).

However, this dynamic should be contextualized within the Brazilian setting (Beccaria & Maurizio, 2020; Menezes-Filho & Narita, 2025). The perception of poor performance is not always related to a lack of competence but may be associated with dissatisfaction regarding benefits, flexibility policies, or the absence of practices such as telecommuting (Carvalho Neto, 2020; Kristof-Brown, 1996). This aspect becomes even more relevant in restructuring scenarios, such as mergers and acquisitions, where cultural and organizational changes can intensify employees' perceived misalignment. These factors are also observable in global contexts, as evidenced by the high turnover intention rates presented in Table 1. Such elements highlight the importance of analyzing the underlying motivations behind voluntary exits, distinguishing between functional and dysfunctional cases in a contextualized manner.

From a functional perspective, the departure of underperforming employees opens opportunities for the entry of more qualified and motivated professionals, potentially enhancing overall performance (Trevor & Piyanontalee, 2020). This effect is explored by Context-Emergent Turnover Theory, which posits that certain levels of turnover are beneficial for organizational equilibrium (Nyberg & Ployhart, 2013). In operational roles, low to moderate turnover rates can prevent skill stagnation, promote diversity of perspectives, and increase the organization's flexibility in the face of change (Li et al., 2025; Simón et al., 2022). When well-managed, this movement creates space for the development of remaining employees and supports the circulation of internal talent, thus strengthening organizational adaptability.

Turnover can also trigger structural changes. When voluntary turnover exceeds a tipping point, it can break rigid patterns, weaken stagnant relationships, and catalyze significant organizational transformations. According to Li et al. (2025), such fluctuations create favorable conditions for the generation of new knowledge, foster the flow of information, and expand the organization's capacity to respond to external pressures. In this sense, turnover can disrupt institutional inertia and act as a strategic force for structural renewal and innovation. Another positive effect lies in the improvement of the work climate. The voluntary exit of employees with poor performance or dysfunctional behaviors can relieve work overloads, rebalance task distribution, and strengthen team dynamics (Heleno et al., 2018). In Brazil, for instance, the departure of abusive leaders has been linked to reduced stress and increased employee engagement (Oliveira & Najnudel, 2023). Replacing these leaders with managers focused on human development and interpersonal support contributes to talent retention (Souza et al., 2022). Conservation of Resources Theory helps explain how the removal of stress sources preserves employees' emotional and cognitive resources, leading to greater well-being and performance (Becker et al., 2023; Hobfoll, 1989). Additionally, the departure of undesirable figures may improve team morale and reduce persistent conflicts, creating a more cohesive and functional environment (Trevor & Piyanontalee, 2020).

Voluntary turnover also fosters the renewal of human capital. The exit of professionals with outdated skills allows for the entry of employees with up-to-date abilities, innovative ideas, and diverse experiences (Li et al., 2022; De Winne et al., 2019). This renewal enhances operational efficiency, improves financial outcomes, and accelerates the organization's strategic adaptation (Santos & Santos, 2022; Shin & Alam, 2022). An additional aspect is the return of former employees –the so-called “boomerangs”– who bring new knowledge and experiences acquired in other organizations (Bolt et al., 2022). From the perspective of Social Exchange Theory, these returns reinforce organizational ties and contribute to the team's collective tacit knowledge (Blau, 1964; Serenko, 2024). These observations are particularly relevant for Brazilian organizations in understanding that employee departures and arrivals go beyond financial exchanges or benefits (Beccaria & Maurizio, 2020; Menezes-Filho & Narita, 2025).

Given these considerations, it can be affirmed that voluntary turnover, when strategically and contextually managed, not only corrects misalignments but also contributes to innovation, organizational well-being, and continuous improvement. The next section discusses the dysfunctional effects of turnover, aiming to provide a comprehensive and critical understanding of the multiple outcomes of this phenomenon within organizations.

What are the main negative impacts caused by Voluntary Employee?

Voluntary employee turnover can trigger complex and long-lasting organizational dysfunctions. Due to its practical relevance and the challenges it poses for management, it is one of the most extensively studied forms of turnover in international research (Bolt et al., 2022; Lee et al., 2018; Hom et al., 2017). Interest in the topic is expected to grow, considering the high rates of voluntary turnover and turnover intentions reported across different countries and continents, as shown in Table 1. The recurrence and negative impacts of voluntary turnover are so widely acknowledged that, in many contexts, its effects are often conflated with the general concept of turnover itself.

Several studies highlight adverse consequences associated with voluntary employee departures, such as reduced productivity (De Winne et al., 2019), lower profitability (Li et al., 2022), deterioration in service quality (Shin & Alam, 2022; Walumbwa et al., 2019), decreased customer satisfaction (Rubenstein et al., 2018), and loss of added value in operations (Santos & Santos, 2022; De Meulenaere et al., 2021; Moon et al., 2023). These effects are exacerbated in contexts of organizational instability, such as mergers, acquisitions,

or privatizations, where structural changes heighten institutional vulnerability and the risks associated with the loss of strategic professionals.

A common question among managers is: What are the actual costs of voluntary turnover? The answer is not straightforward. A portion of these costs is classified as “hidden costs” because they involve indirect expenses related to recruitment, selection, training, onboarding of new hires, and productivity loss during the adaptation period (Santos & Santos, 2022). A meta-analysis conducted by Rubenstein et al. (2018) estimates that the total cost of replacement may exceed 200% of the former employee’s annual salary. Brazilian evidence supports this estimate: In a public hospital in São Paulo (southeastern Brazil), replacing nurses cost up to three times the worker’s monthly salary (Ruiz & Perroca, 2016); in a glass manufacturing company located in Paraíba (northeastern Brazil), annual turnover costs exceeded BRL 600,000, representing about 11% of the final value of the product sold (Santos & Santos, 2022). These findings are relevant not only for Brazil but also for other South American countries that share similar institutional structures and challenges, such as Argentina, Ecuador, Paraguay, and Peru (Beccaria & Maurizio, 2020; Menezes-Filho & Narita, 2025).

At the operational level, turnover compromises service continuity and can lead to production failures. The frequent departure of employees undermines delivery quality, increases the rate of defective products (Moon et al., 2023), and raises the risk of accidents –especially when remaining workers are overburdened (Heleno et al., 2018). These effects can be analyzed through the lens of Conservation of Resources Theory (Hobfoll, 1989), which highlights how the progressive loss of human and organizational resources intensifies occupational stress, further increasing turnover intentions. This effect is particularly evident in high-pressure environments such as platform-mediated labor or companies undergoing privatization (Costa et al., 2023).

Beyond financial and operational damage, are there other negative impacts? Yes. Voluntary turnover undermines organizations’ intellectual capital. The departure of experienced professionals entails the loss of tacit knowledge, technical competencies, and accumulated expertise, which weakens organizational memory and reduces long-term competitive advantage (Rubenstein et al., 2018; Walumbwa et al., 2019). Context-Emergent Turnover Theory (Nyberg & Ployhart, 2013) offers a valuable analytical framework for examining how this knowledge migrates to other institutions, especially in knowledge-intensive sectors such as healthcare and education (Beria et al., 2017; Oliva et al., 2022; Seidl et al., 2018). Additionally, the theory helps identify broader organizational dysfunctions related to the deterioration of quality of work life and increased absenteeism (Barbosa et al., 2025; Calvosa, 2022).

Given the multiplicity of these impacts, it becomes essential to integrate the management of voluntary turnover into organizational strategic planning (Calvosa, 2023). This integration should take into account its effects on organizational climate (Iwai et al., 2023), the meaning of work for employees (Calvosa, 2022), the preservation of institutional memory (Souza et al., 2022), and alignment with the organization’s strategic focus (Serenko, 2023). Based on this approach, human resource managers will be better equipped to make informed decisions and develop evidence-based retention policies, while researchers will find a robust foundation for expanding their analyses of the structural, operational, and subjective effects of turnover in the Brazilian context.

Final considerations

Voluntary employee turnover presents itself as both a dichotomous and multifaceted phenomenon, capable of producing adverse consequences as well as unexpected benefits. The evidence from secondary data – marked by high levels of turnover intention – highlights the timeliness and urgency of understanding this movement. At the same time, its examination through traditional and emerging theoretical lenses reveals the multiple ways of interpreting its origins and dynamics. In particular, the figures presented in Table 1 directly echo the assumptions of Social Exchange Theory (imbalance in exchanges), Conservation of Resources Theory

(fear of resource loss), Person-Organization Fit (value misalignment), Job Embeddedness (weak relational ties), Social Identity Theory (identity-based resentment), and Context-Emergent Turnover Theory (effects of collective exits). These frameworks each offer a distinct perspective for decoding these statistics.

The dichotomous impacts of turnover fluctuate between opportunities for innovation and dysfunctional challenges: On the one hand, structural renewal brings cognitive effects, incorporates new skills, and stimulates creative processes; on the other hand, the loss of social capital, project discontinuity, and rising recruitment costs may fragment teams and disrupt organizational cultures. This duality –turnover as a catalyst for change and a driver of instability– challenges managers to move beyond a narrow view and to interpret the phenomenon as a thermometer of emerging tensions in the employee-organization relationship.

Nevertheless, relevant limitations must be acknowledged: The emphasis on high-impact journals may have excluded contributions from early-career researchers, and we did not explore in depth how different hierarchical levels or specific turnover rates moderate its effects. To advance understanding of this phenomenon, we propose the following provocative research agenda for future studies: (1) concurrent investigations that assess both the positive and negative impacts of voluntary turnover within a single experimental design; (2) experiments testing the moderating effects of varying voluntary turnover rates on organizational performance and climate indicators; and (3) studies exploring how employees' job positions moderate the consequences of voluntary turnover.

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Notes

- * Artigo de investigação

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