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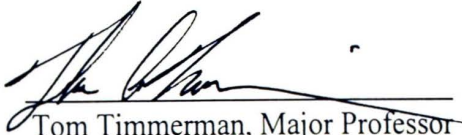
THE EFFECT OF EMPLOYEE EMPOWERMENT ON TURNOVER  
INTENTIONS IN THE FAST FOOD INDUSTRY

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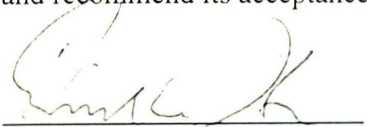

JAMIE BARNETT THURMAN

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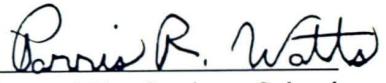
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# The Effect of Employee Empowerment on Turnover Intentions in the Fast Food Industry

A Thesis

Presented for the

Master of Arts

Degree

Austin Peay State University

Jamie Barnett Thurman

August 2000

## ABSTRACT

This study used a modified version of the SERV\*OR, a measure of job satisfaction, and a measure of turnover intent to determine the relationship between employee empowerment and turnover intent in the fast food industry. Results support the predicted relationship between empowerment and job satisfaction, job satisfaction and turnover intent, and empowerment turnover intent. In addition, the personal characteristics of age, tenure, and status had a slight moderating effect on the empowerment-turnover intent relationship. Although this study failed to produce statistically significant results, due in part to a weak empowerment measure, the proposed relationship between employee empowerment and turnover intent may exist in other industries.

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# CHAPTER I

## REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

### *Introduction*

The purpose of this study was to determine the relationship between employee empowerment and turnover intent within the fast food industry. Given the general trend toward empowerment, and the continual research designed to explain and predict turnover, an examination of the empowerment-turnover relationship is worthwhile for both academic and practical purposes. Based on previous research, which has found a positive relationship between employee empowerment and job satisfaction (e.g., Fulford & Enz, 1995; Johnson & McIntye, 1998; Koberg, Boss, Senjem & Goodman, 1999; Parr & Bradley, 1996; Pearson, 1992; Spector, 1986; Wu & Short, 1996), and an inverse relationship between job satisfaction and turnover intent (e.g., Crawford & Nonis, 1996; Gregson, 1990; Larwood, Wright, Desrochers & Dahir, 1998; Lum, Kervin, Clark, Reid & Sirola, 1998), it was postulated that a negative relationship between employee empowerment and turnover intent exists. In addition, the research conducted by Koberg et al. (1999) suggests the presence of moderating influences on employee empowerment. The existence and effect of such factors in the fast food industry was tested as well.

### *The relationship between empowerment and job satisfaction*

Empowerment is the latitude given to an employee to make and carry out decisions based on the immediate work situation (Herrenkohl, Judson, & Heffner, 1999). It is a multidimensional construct, comprised of autonomy, competence, meaningfulness, and impact (Gagne, Sencal, and Koestner, 1997). According to Randolph (1995), companies hoping to successfully empower their employees must follow three basic strategies: (1)



create trust and understanding by sharing company performance information, (2) develop a system of structured autonomy, and (3) create a more horizontal company profile by replacing hierarchy with teams. The benefits organizations expect to gain by empowering their employees include improvements in attitude, such as job satisfaction and loyalty, and in performance (Fulford & Enz, 1995).

The relationship between empowerment and job satisfaction is well substantiated. Johnson and McIntye (1998) surveyed over 8,000 government service employees regarding organizational culture and climate. The strongest relationship reported was between job satisfaction and empowerment. In fact, the three items that correlated most highly with job satisfaction were empowerment items. Fulford and Enz (1995) found a similar relationship between empowerment and job satisfaction among service employees in private clubs. This relationship exists in other industries as well. The members of the Association for Counselor Education and Supervision who were most satisfied with their career reported high levels of empowerment (Parr & Bradley, 1996). Wu and Short (1996) found a significant relationship between empowerment and job satisfaction among public school teachers and, according to Koberg et al. (1999), hospital employees who feel empowered are more satisfied with their job.

Further evidence of the empowerment-job satisfaction relationship is provided by Spector (1986), who conducted a meta-analysis to explore the relationship between perceived control and various employee outcome variables. Perceived control is determined through measures of control, autonomy and participation, constructs similar to empowerment. Spector found a strong correlation between high levels of perceived control and high levels of job satisfaction. This relationship appears to exist on the group

level as well as the individual level. In a longitudinal study of workgroups in a heavy engineering workshop, the autonomous groups reported higher job satisfaction than the non-autonomous groups (Pearson, 1992).

*The relationship between job satisfaction and turnover intent*

Turnover is an issue that effects all organizations, across all industries. Although there are circumstances under which turnover can be beneficial (Dalton & Todor, 1993), it is typically regarded as a negative but inevitable aspect of doing business. Turnover can be predicted fairly accurately by measuring turnover intent (Bedeian, Kemery, & Pizzolatto, 1991), but, despite numerous studies aimed at understanding turnover, methods of controlling and diminishing it remain weak at best.

One aspect of turnover that has proven fairly consistent is the inverse relationship between job satisfaction and turnover intent. Larwood et al. (1998) found that less-satisfied business personnel are more likely to have turnover intentions than their satisfied counterparts. The negative relationship between job satisfaction and turnover intent also exists among accountants (Gregson, 1990) and purchasing professionals (Crawford & Nonis, 1996). Given such findings, attempts have been made to reduce turnover intent, thereby reducing turnover, by increasing employee perceptions of job satisfaction. New research suggests there may be additional, more effective methods of controlling turnover than altering employee job satisfaction. In a study designed to explain turnover behavior among nurses, Lum et al. (1998) conclude that job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and pay satisfaction each influence turnover intent to varying degrees. In addition, the relationship between pay satisfaction and turnover intent is moderated by personal factors such as having a degree, having children, and shift length. Given the

positive relationship between job satisfaction and empowerment, and the negative relationship between job satisfaction and turnover intent, it may be possible to reduce turnover intentions by increasing empowerment.

*The relationship between empowerment and turnover intent*

There is some evidence to suggest that empowerment is negatively related to both actual turnover and turnover intent. In her study of teacher turnover, Maddox (1998) argued that one cause of turnover is the absence of empowerment; those teachers who felt empowered were less likely to quit. In their study on the outcomes and antecedents of empowerment, Koberg et al. (1999) found that empowerment is predictive of both job satisfaction and turnover intentions among hospital employees. Also considered were the effects of individual characteristics, including education, tenure, gender and ethnicity, on empowerment. Tenure with the organization was the only personal characteristic significantly correlated with empowerment.

Research on the effects of autonomy provides indirect support of the relationship between empowerment and turnover intent, given the previously discussed overlap of the constructs. Lubatkin, Schweiger, and Weber (1999) demonstrated a predictive relationship between autonomy and turnover in merging firms. Spector's (1986) meta-analysis suggested a negative relationship between autonomy and turnover intentions. Pearson (1992) intended to study the relationship between autonomy and turnover but lacked sufficient data to continue. Conversely, empowerment is correlated with loyalty (Fulford & Enz, 1995) and organizational commitment (Wu & Short, 1996), both of which have a negative relationship with turnover intent.



## *Research significance and hypotheses*

As previously stated, the purpose of this research was to examine the relationship between employee empowerment and turnover intent within the fast food industry. The potential benefits of this study were twofold. First, fast food provides an ever increasing number of employment opportunities; sixteen years ago over three and a half million people worked in the business (Charner & Fraser, 1984) and, given the continued growth of the industry, it seems safe to assume that number has dramatically increased.

According to Highhouse, Zickar, Thorsteinson, Stierwalt, & Slaughter (1999), well-known companies, such as Burger King, McDonald's, Taco Bell, and Wendy's, are dealing with a shortage of young people willing to work in the traditionally low-level, low-paying positions. The typical response has been to offer higher wages and incentive programs and increase recruitment advertising. Companies so engaged in recruiting employees are likely to be just as interested in keeping them. It is therefore of both academic and practical importance to determine the effect of empowerment on employee retention in the fast food industry. Based on the findings of previous research and the lack of information regarding the employee empowerment-turnover intent relationship in low-level positions, the following hypotheses have been formed:

Hypothesis 1a: There is a positive relationship between empowerment and job satisfaction.

Hypothesis 1b: There is a negative relationship between job satisfaction and turnover intent.

Hypothesis 1c: There is a negative relationship between empowerment and turnover intent.



The study by Koberg et al. (1999) suggests that the individual characteristics might effect perceptions of employee empowerment; among hospital staff, empowerment increased as tenure increased. Personal characteristics may have a similar effect on the empowerment-turnover intent relationship. If employees with more tenure expect to be empowered, failure to meet this expectation should result in increased turnover intentions.

Hypothesis 2a: The relationship between empowerment and turnover intent is moderated by tenure such that the relationship is stronger among those higher in tenure.

Although Koberg et al. (1999) were unable to support their hypothesis that women, who typically hold lower positions, feel less empowered than men, the effect of gender on the empowerment-turnover intent relationship could be substantial. If women have lower empowerment expectations, the relationship between empowerment and turnover intent should be weak

Hypothesis 2b: The relationship between empowerment and turnover intent is moderated by gender such that the relationship is stronger among males.

It is reasonable to predict that employees who hold the more prestigious positions expect to be more empowered. In addition, older employees may expect more empowerment based on their maturity and past experiences. Under such circumstances, a lack of empowerment should result in increased turnover intent.

Hypothesis 2c: The relationship between empowerment and turnover intent is moderated by position such that the relationship is stronger among those higher in position.

Hypothesis 2d: The relationship between empowerment and turnover intent is moderated by age such that the relationship is stronger among those higher in age.

And finally, those employees who work part-time may not expect to be empowered due to their lower status. A weak relationship between empowerment and turnover intent was expected among part-time employees.

Hypothesis 2e: The relationship between empowerment and turnover intent is moderated by work status such that the relationship is stronger among those higher in status.

## CHAPTER II

### METHODOLOGY

#### *Participants*

The data used for this study is archival, provided by Krystal, a fast food company based out of Tennessee. The participants were in-house, hourly employees of Krystal. Of the 2,621 participants, 71.1% were female, the remaining 28.9% male. Ages range from 16 to over 62, with the majority (61%) aged 29 or under. The ethnic makeup of the population was 52.5% Black/African American, 38.8% White/Caucasian, 3.7% Hispanic, 1% Asian, 1% Native American, and 2.4% "Other." The participants' education level ranged from those with eight years or less of formal schooling to college graduates. The majority (50.4%) had their high school diploma or equivalent. Most participants (65.8%) held full-time positions and 74.8% worked in food production or customer service. Over 55% of the participants worked for Krystal less than one year. Table 1 provides relevant demographic information.

#### *Measurement Instruments*

Krystal surveyed their employees using a modified version of the SERV\*OR, a 35-item Likert-type questionnaire with a seven point scale ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (7). The SERV\*OR is designed to measure "key organizational practices, procedures, and routines indicative of an organizational service orientation" (Lytle, Hom & Mokwa, 1998). Acceptable levels of reliability and validity have been established through confirmatory factor analysis.

TABLE 1  
Key Demographic Characteristics

	Number of Respondents	Percentage of Respondents
<b>Tenure with Krystal</b>		
Less than 90 days	564	23.7
90 days but less than 6 months	392	16.5
6 months but less than 1 year	374	15.7
1 year but less than 3 years	529	22.3
3 years but less than 5 years	212	8.9
5 years or more	305	12.8
	<hr/> 2376	
<b>Work Status</b>		
Part-time	744	65.8
Full-time	1434	34.2
	<hr/> 2178	
<b>Age</b>		
16 - 18	485	20.7
19 - 22	509	21.7
23 - 29	435	18.6
30 - 36	367	15.7
37 - 43	268	11.4
44 - 48	122	5.2
49 - 55	91	3.9
56 - 61	41	1.8
62 and over	23	1.0
	<hr/> 2341	
<b>Position*</b>		
Restaurant General Manager	76	3.4
Assistant Restaurant Manager	124	5.6
Shift Leader	253	11.4
Production Associate	539	24.3
Service Associate	712	32.1
QSC Associate	409	18.4
	<hr/> 2113	
<b>Gender</b>		
Female	1576	71.1
Male	641	28.9
	<hr/> 2217	

\* Not all categories are included



The Employee Empowerment dimension of the SERV\*OR was utilized for the purposes of this study. An empowerment scale was created by averaging the two items presented in Table 2. Using Cronbach's alpha, the scale was tested for reliability, which proved to be unacceptably low at .34. In addition, the correlation between the two empowerment items was weak,  $r = .20$ ,  $p < .01$ . Given the low reliability, results are reported using the scale and the individual items. Item 2 was deemed the best measure of employee empowerment available at that point in the study. The correlation between Item 2 and job satisfaction ( $r = .24$ ,  $p < .01$ ) is the most consistent with previous research.

Additional items were included in the questionnaire to provide information on work outcomes. A job satisfaction scale was created by averaging the three items presented in Table 2,  $\alpha = .70$  (Cammann, Fichman, Jenkins, & Klesh, 1979). The turnover intent scale was created by averaging the three items presented in Table 2,  $\alpha = .73$  (Cammann et al, 1979). The job satisfaction and turnover intent items used the same seven-point scale, ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (7). The items were coded such that high scores indicate high job satisfaction and high turnover intent.

The demographic data was used to measure the moderating effect of tenure, gender, position, work status, and age on the employee empowerment – turnover intent relationship. In order to measure this effect, participants were divided into two categories across each characteristic, creating ten subgroups. The subgroups for age and tenure follow an approximate median split. The subgroups are presented in Table 3.

TABLE 2  
Questionnaire Items Included In Each Scale

Scale	Items
Employee Empowerment	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Decisions are made "close to the customer." In other words, employees often make important customer decisions without seeking management approval.</li> <li>2. Employees have the freedom and authority to act independently in order to provide excellent service.</li> </ol>
Job Satisfaction	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. All in all, I am satisfied with my job.</li> <li>2. In general, I don't like my job.</li> <li>3. In general, I like working here.</li> </ol>
Turnover Intent	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. I will probably look for a new job in the next year.</li> <li>2. I would probably be better off working for another company.</li> <li>3. I often think of quitting.</li> </ol>

TABLE 3  
Demographic Categories

Dimension	Group 1 (Low)	N	%	Group 2 (High)	N	%
Tenure	1 year or less	1330	56	More than 1 year	1046	44
Gender	Female	1576	71	Male	641	29
Position	Associate	1660	79	Manager/Leader	453	21
Work Status	Part-time	744	34	Full-time	1434	66
Age	29 and under	1429	61	30 and over	912	39

### *Procedure*

The data was collected in November and December of 1999 by a faculty and student team of researchers from Austin Peay State University. Using the modified SERV\*OR previously described, 9,282 surveys were mailed to 357 restaurants. Participation was completely voluntary. Included in the mailing was a letter describing the purpose of the study, survey instructions, an informed consent statement and a statement regarding the participants' rights. The survey was distributed and collected by management personnel at each restaurant, then forwarded in bulk to the research team at Austin Peay State University. Nearly half (47%) of the restaurants are represented in the 2,621 returned surveys.

## CHAPTER III

### RESULTS

The Pearson Correlation Coefficient was used to determine the relationship between employee empowerment, job satisfaction, and turnover intent. As predicted, there is a positive correlation between empowerment and job satisfaction, a negative correlation between job satisfaction and turnover intent, and a negative correlation between empowerment and turnover intent. Thus, hypotheses 1a, 1b, and 1c were supported, as shown in Table 4.

The relationship between employee empowerment and turnover intent was measured for each subgroup using the Pearson Correlation Coefficient, see Table 5. The correlation coefficients were transformed with the Fisher Z-Transform to determine the significance of the differences between each demographically defined group. As predicted, the empowerment-turnover intent relationship was slightly stronger among those employees with more tenure ( $p = .124$ ), those who worked full-time ( $p = .071$ ), and those who were older ( $p = .166$ ). Although the relationship was in the expected direction, the differences did not reach conventional levels of significance. The relationship between empowerment and turnover intent was stronger for females ( $p = .187$ ), and for associates ( $p = .494$ ).



TABLE 4  
Empowerment, Job Satisfaction, and Turnover Intent

Scale	Empowerment	EE Item 1	EE Item 2	Job Satisfaction	Turnover Intent
Empowerment	1.000				
N	2603				
EE Item 1	.798**	1.000			
N	2558	2558			
EE Item 2	.760**	.203**	1.000		
N	2577	2532	2577		
Job Satisfaction	.132**	-.025	.237**	1.000	
N	2464	2425	2442	2477	
Turnover Intent	-.023	.084**	-.121**	-.541**	1.000
N	2567	2525	2544	2472	2582

\*\* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level

TABLE 5  
Correlation between Empowerment Item 2 and Outcomes across Subgroups

Characteristic	Mean	S.D.	Job Satisfaction	Turnover Intent
Tenure				
Low	4.90	1.86	.221**	-.108**
High	5.01	1.81	.241**	-.171**
Gender				
Male	4.84	1.87	.201**	-.110**
Female	4.97	1.83	.259**	-.171**
Position				
Associate	4.93	1.87	.271**	-.151**
Manager/Leader	5.04	1.66	.139**	-.115*
Work Status				
Part-time	4.82	1.82	.223**	-.086*
Full-time	5.01	1.85	.240**	-.167**
Age				
29 and under	4.94	1.82	.232**	-.120**
30 and over	4.95	1.89	.257**	-.178**

\* Correlation is significant at the .05 level.

\*\* Correlation is significant at the .01 level.

## CHAPTER IV

### DISCUSSION

This study was designed to examine the relationship between empowerment and turnover intent in the fast food industry. The data supports the first two hypotheses: 1) there is a positive relationship between employee empowerment and job satisfaction, and 2) there is a negative relationship between job satisfaction and turnover intent. In addition, the data is consistent with the third hypothesis, there is a negative relationship between employee empowerment and turnover intent, but any inferences made must be qualified by the fact that Item 1 of the Employee Empowerment scale was discarded. Of the hypotheses pertaining to personal characteristics, the results are in the expected direction regarding tenure, age, and status. The expected effect of gender and position on the employee empowerment-turnover intent relationship was not found; the relationship is stronger among females than males and among associates than managers and leaders.

This study adds to the body of research on the effects of empowerment, job satisfaction, and turnover intent. Generally speaking, empowered employees are more likely to be satisfied, satisfied employees are less likely to turnover, and empowered employees are less likely to turnover. Previous research shows these relationships exist among teachers (Maddox, 1998) and hospital employees (Koberg, 1999). This study suggests they also exist in the fast food industry.

The most obvious limitation of this study is the weakness of the empowerment measure. The employee empowerment section of the SERV\*OR was not designed to be used alone. The low reliability of the scale ( $\alpha = .34$ ) necessitated the use of an alternate empowerment instrument. Because the data was archival, the only option was to

use one of the two individual empowerment items. The wording and structure of the first item (see Table 2) is somewhat confusing. For instance, participants could have construed the phrase “without seeking management approval” as referring to a disregard of company policies. In addition, the phrase “close to the customer” is fairly unclear in meaning and open to a variety of interpretations. The second item, “Employees have the freedom and authority to act independently in order to provide excellent service” is a more straightforward measure of empowerment as defined in this study. Therefore, the hypotheses were tested using a single-item measure of empowerment. This is hardly ideal.

The inability of this research to produce statistically significant results could be due in part to the population. High turnover may be a basic aspect of the fast food industry; the jobs are typically menial with little-to-no prestige and low wages. As this study suggests, the relationship between employee empowerment and turnover intent, and the moderating effect of personal characteristics, may not be strong enough in the fast food industry to warrant practical changes in the field. However, there are numerous businesses that could potentially benefit from further research in this area.

Future studies should focus on industries with more typical rates of turnover. They should be specifically designed to measure turnover and turnover intent across existing levels of empowerment. The relationship between empowerment and turnover intent should be studied in different populations, specifically in a more professional arena, where employees are well educated, highly experienced, and difficult to replace. Assuming the trend toward empowerment will continue, any research designed to provide a better understanding of its effects and implications is worthwhile endeavor.

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## VITA

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