



## Is retention necessarily a win? Outcomes of searching and staying



Wendy R. Boswell<sup>a</sup>, Richard G. Gardner<sup>b,\*</sup>, Jiexin Wang<sup>c</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Department of Management, Mays Business School, 483D Wehner, Texas A&M University, College Station, TX 77843-4221, United States

<sup>b</sup> Management, Entrepreneurship, and Technology Department, Lee Business School, University of Nevada, 310 Beam Hall, Las Vegas, NV 89154, United States

<sup>c</sup> Business and Economics, 120 Ridge View Drive, Pennsylvania State University, Scranton, Dunmore, PA 18512, United States

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### ABSTRACT

This research examines the issue of employee retention by considering what happens to employees that engage in the job search process yet end up staying with an organization. Grounded in the conceptualization of reluctant staying from Hom, Mitchell, Lee, and Griffeth (2012), we consider a potential downside of employee retention. Specifically, the study examines the psychological (i.e., job dissatisfaction, low organizational commitment) and behavioral detachment (i.e., neglect behavior, diminished job performance) employees may experience when they search for alternative employment yet ultimately stay with an organization. This study also examines the moderating role of the objective underlying the search behavior on job search and its criteria, arguing that the strength of the search-criteria link varies depending upon an employee's objective "to leave" the current employer. Results suggest an increase in psychological detachment and greater neglect behavior for employees that searched and stayed. These findings were not dependent on the reported objective "to leave" the employer. Implications for research on job search activity and withdrawal are discussed.

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Researchers and managers have long sought to investigate the cost of employee turnover. The academic literature on employee turnover is fairly established, offering a great deal of insight on the predictors (e.g., individual difference and situational factors; Griffeth, Hom, & Gaertner, 2000) and the process of employee withdrawal and turnover. Research has also begun to examine the converse of employee turnover decisions, focusing on why employees stay with an organization (e.g., embeddedness; Mitchell, Holtom, Lee, Sablynski, & Erez, 2001). Challenging the conventional wisdom that employees want either to simply stay ('non-exit') or to leave ('exit') (e.g., Hirschman, 1970), we believe there is an existence of a middle ground—people stay while their mind-set is already gone. Thus, an important element of understanding the employee retention process and the implications for organizations is to consider what happens to employees that engage in the withdrawal process yet end up staying with an organization (Boswell, Zimmerman, & Swider, 2012). That is, what are the consequences when employees that seek to leave an organization end up remaining? Is this type of retention a "win" for the employer or might there be subsequent effects associated with the withdrawal process?

The purpose of this study is to examine the work-related outcomes of job search activity among employees that do not leave an organization (i.e., "stayers"). More specifically, we investigate the effects of searching for alternative employment yet not leaving on subsequent employee attitudes (i.e., job satisfaction and organizational commitment) and behaviors (i.e., neglect and performance). We acknowledge that much of the job search research has investigated how job attitudes such as satisfaction and commitment serve as antecedents to job search (Blau, 1994; Bretz, Boudreau, & Judge, 1994; van Hoof, Born, Taris, van

\* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: [wboswell@tamu.edu](mailto:wboswell@tamu.edu) (W.R. Boswell), [richard.gardner@unlv.edu](mailto:richard.gardner@unlv.edu) (R.G. Gardner), [juw410@psu.edu](mailto:juw410@psu.edu) (J. Wang).

der Flier, & Blonk, 2004). However, drawing on a work withdrawal framework (Hanisch & Hulin, 1990, 1991; Hulin, 1990) and related research on an expanded conceptualization of the turnover domain (Boswell et al., 2012; Hom, Mitchell, Lee, & Griffeth, 2012), we argue that employees that seek to leave their employer yet do not leave the organization are likely to engage in other withdrawal-related behavior to adapt to the situation of staying with that employer. We examine both general search activity linked to subsequent consequences of not leaving as well as the specific job search intention of “searching to leave” (Boswell, Boudreau, & Dunford, 2004).

Accordingly, this research offers three key contributions to our understanding of employee job search and withdrawal. First, by focusing on an often neglected group of individuals in the job search literature (namely, employees that stay rather than leave) and responding to the call for offering insight as to job search behavior in different populations of job seekers (Boswell et al., 2012), we shed light on the consequences of search behavior beyond simply leaving an organization. Prior work has emphasized the importance of examining consequences to employee withdrawal cognitions and search activity other than turnover (Hom et al., 2012), yet few studies have considered the effects on an array of employee attitudes and behaviors. Second, and related, we propose and investigate that retention may not necessarily be a “win” for an organization. That is, although the costs of turnover are fairly well known, this study considers the potential downside of employees staying. Related, this research expands the theory and research on employee withdrawal and consequent reactions (cf. Hom et al., 2012) linked to job search activity, recognizing that individuals may react to their employment situation through different types of attitudinal responses and adaptive behaviors. Finally, by also examining the objective underlying the search activity to subsequent reactions, this study contributes to a growing literature that suggests individuals search with varying goals in mind and that incorporating those goals to models of job search may offer new insights and precision in understanding the search process and the subsequent consequences.

## 1. Employee job search

Job search involves the expenditure of effort to acquire information about labor market alternatives and generate employment opportunities (Boswell, 2006). Job search activity (also referred to as job search *behavior*) is a key component of many turnover models, often viewed as the most proximal determinant of turnover (e.g., Griffeth et al., 2000; Hom & Griffeth, 1991; Mobley, 1977; Mobley, Griffeth, Hand, & Meglino, 1979; Steers & Mowday, 1981). Research has also recognized that search does not always precede turnover (i.e., a “shock” may lead an individual to quit without searching, Lee & Mitchell, 1994; Lee, Mitchell, Wise, & Fireman, 1996) and certainly not all employees that search for alternative employment end up leaving the current employer. Indeed, although the strongest behavioral predictor to voluntary turnover, the average weighted correlation between job search and turnover is moderate ( $r = 0.26$ ; Griffeth et al., 2000). Yet the basic argument is that discontent with the current employment situation leads to withdrawal cognitions and a search for and evaluation of alternatives.

A question arises as to what helps explain the modest correlation between search and turnover; that is, why wouldn't search activity necessarily lead to turnover? Whether search activity generates viable options (“successful job search” Mobley et al., 1979; Steers & Mowday, 1981), and thus having the opportunity to leave, is arguably a key mitigating factor. Indeed, ability to leave stems back to March and Simon's (1958) seminal model of employee turnover whereby ease of movement was proposed as a key determinant (along with desirability) to ensuing turnover. Movement ease (or opportunity to leave, Bretz et al., 1994) may stem from labor market conditions (e.g., job, industry, or regional unemployment) and/or an individual's own human capital (e.g., skills, abilities, education, experience) as well as a comparison of alternatives generated to the current job. In an empirical examination of this, Swider, Boswell, and Zimmerman (2011) found a moderating role for alternative opportunities (both unemployment rate and perceived alternatives) on the search-turnover link such that search was most likely to lead turnover within the context of a stronger labor market. The researchers also emphasized the importance of *viable* alternatives, proposing and finding that the more satisfied and/or embedded an individual is with a current employer, the more difficult it may be for him/her to obtain alternative employment more favorable to the current job or that overcomes the costs and sacrifices of leaving. Taken together, prior empirical work and theorizing suggests not only that search may not lead to subsequent turnover but that there are likely important implications for an individual that ends up staying with the organization.

In this study, we propose that searching and not leaving is likely to be met with discontent on the part of the job seeker. Although some individuals may search with little intent or desire to actually leave (an issue we develop and examine below in our moderating hypothesis), our baseline expectation is that searching and not leaving will generally equate as a failed search. This is akin to prior discussions of “intention-to-quit nonquitters” (Bowen, 1982) or more recently as “reluctant stayers” (Hom et al., 2012) whereby the individual sought alternative employment but does not leave. Although the present research does not specifically examine the reason why the employee stays (e.g., high embeddedness constraining viability of alternatives, inability to secure unemployment due to low human capital), we argue that as some level of discontent with the current employment situation would drive one's desire to seek out alternatives, remaining in the current situation would be met with negative attitudes and deleterious behaviors as an individual is in essence “blocked from leaving” (Hom et al., 2012, p. 836).

Also discussed as “dysfunctional retention” (Schiemann, 2009), prior work on employee withdrawal has contrasted the nature of employee withdrawal – physically withdrawing from the job and organization (exit-related withdrawal; e.g., Boswell & Olson-Buchanan, 2004; Hanisch & Hulin, 1990) or remaining part of the organization but psychologically distant and/or engaging in adverse work behaviors such as work avoidance or diminished performance (Boswell & Olson-Buchanan, 2004; Greenhalgh, 1980; Hom et al., 2012). We would expect that as the former withdrawal (exit/turnover) is in some way thwarted and the employee is entrapped in the current situation, he/she is likely to adapt through an alternative withdrawal mechanism, maintaining the work-role relationship while exhibiting adverse attitudes and behaviors.

Research on inflated expectations and incomplete information during the recruitment process and when one first engages with a potential new employer (cf. Boswell, Shipp, Payne, & Culbertson, 2009) is also informative to understanding subsequent outcomes of searching and staying. The contrast between what a job seeker first learns about other employers, which is often unrealistically positive (Allen, Mahto, & Otondo, 2007; Turban & Greening, 1996), and what has been experienced with the current employer, particularly in light of dissatisfying factors that may initiate the search process, may reinforce or even heighten negative views of the latter. On the other hand, one may learn through the job search process that the grass is not necessarily greener and thus come to see the current employer in a more positive light. Indeed, there is evidence that some individuals engage in search activity to simply stay abreast of the job market and/or remain employable (Van Hoye & Saks, 2008). Yet there is also evidence that simply the process of searching may facilitate detachment from the organization (Boudreau, Boswell, Judge, & Bretz, 2001), with such feelings of detachment likely to foster adverse reactions directed toward the employer. That is, individuals are likely to distance themselves psychologically from the current employer as they investigate, learn about, and consider alternative employment. Other research suggests that as employees contemplate alternative employment, they may become detached from their current employer to ease the psychological transition to another employer and perhaps help further rationalize why they are seeking to leave (Ashforth, 2001). Accordingly, we expect stayers to experience a decline in psychological attachment to and an increase in behavioral withdrawal from the current employer following job search activity.

In this study, we examine both job satisfaction and organizational commitment as criterion variables reflecting affect toward the employer. While job satisfaction reflects subjective feelings about the job (Schleicher, Watt, & Greguras, 2004), organizational commitment, specifically affective commitment, involves an individual's emotional attachment to and identification with an organization and its goals (Meyer & Allen, 1996). Both job satisfaction and organizational commitment are consistently shown to negatively predict employee turnover and related withdrawal variables (Griffeth et al., 2000) and are often included in models of the employee turnover process (Rusbult & Farrell, 1983). Although we similarly expect job dissatisfaction and low affective commitment to associate with seeking alternative employment in the first place (e.g., Farrell, 1983; Hirschman, 1970), and thus control for initial work attitudes, we further propose a decline in these attitudinal variables following search activity. As discussed above, searching and staying is likely to facilitate further psychological detachment from the work relationship that the employee had sought to sever. We acknowledge that the employee may continue to search and ultimately leave for alternative employment beyond the study period examined here, perhaps because the reasons to leave have gained momentum through the job search process (Westaby, 2005), but we focus here on the proximal decline in work attitudes following search activity (Hom et al., 2012). Accordingly, we propose:

**Hypothesis 1.** Among stayers, job search behavior will associate with decreased (a) job satisfaction and (b) organizational commitment.

We also investigate indicators of behavioral withdrawal among stayers who actively engaged in searching for job alternatives. As argued above, individuals that seek alternative employment but do not leave are likely to adapt to the situation by withdrawing via another mechanism (Kahn, 1990; Tett & Meyer, 1993). We focus specifically on employees expressing withdrawal through neglect behavior and diminished task performance. Neglect includes a repertoire of behaviors such as engaging in personal business while at work, avoiding job duties, and calling in sick or arriving late when not justified (Farrell, 1983). It is generally considered a passive activity that has negative consequences for the organization. As employees psychologically detach themselves they become “physically uninvolved in tasks, cognitively unvigilant, and emotionally disconnected from others” (Kahn, 1990, p. 702). In terms of task performance, although there is evidence that poorer performers are more likely to seek alternative employment (Jackofsky, 1984; McEvoy & Cascio, 1987) often due to lack of rewards from or concerns of job insecurity with the current employer, we expect employees that search but stay to show a reduced level of task performance as they seek alternative avenues to withdraw and disengage from the job. We assess this expected decline in performance following search activity by controlling for prior performance level. In sum, we expect searching and staying to associate with dysfunctional workplace behavior in the form of neglect behaviors and declining performance as employees express their attempt to withdraw.

**Hypothesis 2.** Among stayers, job search behavior will associate with (a) greater neglect behavior and (b) decreased job performance.

Thus far we have assumed that job search activity reflects an employee's desire to leave the current employer, and certainly there is theoretical and empirical evidence to support this (Bretz et al., 1994; Griffeth et al., 2000). Yet, individuals search with varying goals, including the level of intent to quit the current employer (Boswell et al., 2004). As such, job search scholars have begun to argue the importance of examining the motives underlying one's search activity to more fully understanding the consequences. The general argument is that “objectives” for engaging in search behavior can vary and have implications for one's motivation to actually leave the current employer (Swider et al., 2011). For example, Boswell et al. (2004) examined “searching for leverage” versus “searching to leave” demonstrating differential validity between the two objectives for engaging the search process among a sample of high-level managers. Specifically, searching to leave (but not searching for leverage) positively predicted turnover one year later while searching for leverage (but not to leave) predicted negotiating with the current employer one year later. An important conclusion from this work is that employees may engage in job search for reasons other than to leave an employer (e.g., improve on job conditions such as salary or position with the present employer). Building on this, research by Van Hoye and Saks (2008) examined search as goal-directed behavior whereby the search objective (e.g., searching to leave, searching to network, etc.) determined one's method of and the ultimate outcome of job search behavior.

Given that turnover is not necessarily the goal driving job search, it is important to incorporate an individual's job search objective to our understanding the consequences to searching and staying.

Accordingly, although we expect that search activity followed by remaining with the employer will generally be met with a decline in job attitudes and performance outcomes due to the associated detachment and withdrawal process initiated, we expect the strongest effect when the individual was searching to leave. In this context, the job search would be deemed “unsuccessful” and the factors leading to the initiation of the search (e.g., dissatisfaction with the job) likely to persist. Engaging in job search for objectives other than to leave (or with mixed motives reflecting ambivalence in the desire to leave) is unlikely to result in the sense of frustration and psychological withdrawal of an unsuccessful turnover attempt. Viewing search as “goal-directed behavior” (Van Hoya & Saks, 2008), an individual is likely to react most negatively when the goal (in this case, to leave the current employer) remains unmet. Although prior work has examined an array of search objectives in addition to “search to leave” (e.g., Boswell et al., 2004), we focus on searching to leave as the moderating search objective since having the initial objective of turnover (yet staying) is most aligned with the theoretical argument of an unsuccessful search. Indeed, the converse –searching *not* to leave – would reflect alternative motives underlying one's search activity.

**Hypothesis 3.** Among stayers, searching to leave will moderate the effect of job search behavior on subsequent job satisfaction, organizational commitment, neglect, and job performance such that there will be a stronger effect when searching to leave.

In sum, we propose that greater search activity will associate with subsequently adverse attitudes and behaviors among employees that do not leave the employer. Further, the negative outcomes will be most pronounced when the objective underlying the search was to leave the employer for new employment.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Sample & Procedure

The sample was recruited from staff employees in a large public university located in the southern United States. Recruitment emails describing the purpose and the voluntary nature of the survey were distributed to 4843 participants along with the survey link. In order to reduce common method bias (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, & Podsakoff, 2012) and assess change in employee attitudes linked to job search activity, we used a time-lag design with a time interval of approximately six weeks between surveys. A total of 1418 surveys were returned at Time 1 (29% response rate). Of those, 689 individuals also returned a Time 2 survey (14% response rate). The Time 1 survey included our independent variables (e.g., job search behaviors, job search objectives, and Time 1 measures of job satisfaction and commitment). The Time 2 survey consisted of our dependent variables (Time 2 job satisfaction, commitment, and neglect). We also collected data from company records (e.g., performance, demographic control variables). Although confidential, respondents' identification numbers were recorded so that individual responses for Time 1 and Time 2 as well as the archival company data could be matched.

After listwise deletion, the final sample consisted of 622 respondents.<sup>1</sup> The respondents had an average age of 45.42 years and an average job tenure of 6.60 years; 60% were female, 76% were married or cohabiting with a significant other. The majority of respondents were Caucasian (88%). Results of independent sample *t*-test suggested that our study sample is free from nonresponse bias, with no significant difference between employees that completed the first survey versus respondents that answered both surveys in regards to measures on the first survey (e.g., job search behaviors) or on any demographic information (e.g., tenure).

### 2.2. Measures

Each participant responded to items described below, anchored from 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree).

#### 2.2.1. Job search behavior

We assessed job search with Blau's (1993) six-item measure of active job search. Respondents were asked about specific job search behaviors that they engaged in during the last six months. Sample items include “I submitted a resume to a potential employer” and “I emailed or telephoned a prospective employer” ( $\alpha = 0.92$ ).

#### 2.2.2. Search to leave

We assessed search with the objective of leaving using Van Hoya and Saks' (2008) three-item measure. Specifically, we asked participants how much they agreed to their job search objectives being “finding a new job”, “looking for a new challenge in the career”, and “changing jobs” ( $\alpha = 0.88$ ).

<sup>1</sup> The company had recently switched to an on-line performance review process, with approximately half the employees not yet transitioned to the new system the year prior to administering the survey. Accordingly, Time 1 performance data was not available for all of the respondents, thereby reducing the sample for performance as the dependent variable to 231.



### 2.2.3. Job satisfaction

We used Cammann, Fichman, Jenkins, and Klesh' (1979) three-item measure of job satisfaction. A sample item includes "All in all, I am satisfied with my job" ( $\alpha = 0.88$ ).

### 2.2.4. Affective organizational commitment

The Allen and Meyer (1990) eight-item affective commitment scale was used. Sample items include "I would be very happy to spend the rest of my career with the university" and "I do not feel a strong sense of belonging to the university" ( $\alpha = 0.91$ ).

### 2.2.5. Neglect

We used the six-item neglect scale from Rusbult, Farrell, Rogers, and Mainous (1988). Sample items include "Now and then there are workdays where I just don't put much effort into my work" and "I try to keep out of sight from my supervisor so I can talk to coworkers, take breaks, or do other personal business (not work)" ( $\alpha = 0.78$ ).

### 2.2.6. Performance

Supervisory assessment of their direct reports' performance was collected from organizational records. The assessment tool asks supervisors to assess the employee's overall performance on a 5-point scale (1 = *Unsatisfactory*, 5 = *Exemplary*). The organization collected performance ratings for staff employees annually with the annual date falling roughly four months after our Time 2 survey. Thus the initial performance data (used as a control variable – discussed more below) corresponded to a performance period of 7–18 months prior to the Time 1 survey that assessed job search activity. Although the second measure of performance (used as the dependent variable) corresponded to the period of performance six months prior through five months after the assessment of search activity (Time 1 survey), we would expect the rating to be most influenced by employees' most recent performance (thus several months following the measurement of search activity). This is supported by research on the recent effect in performance appraisals (e.g., Steiner & Rain, 1989) whereby supervisor assessments of an employee's performance weighs heavily on how the employee performed in the few months or weeks just prior to the appraisal. This is particularly likely in the organization studied as no tools or mechanisms (e.g., documentation of behaviors) were utilized for supervisors to overcome this bias.

### 2.2.7. Control variables

We included control variables that have been used in other studies about job search behaviors and other variables pertinent for our study. We control for initial (Time 1) job attitudes (job satisfaction, affective commitment) and performance in the analyses to account for change in such outcomes following search (Time 2).<sup>2</sup> Controlling for those initial attitudes and behaviors allowed us to avoid problems with difference scores (DeRue & Morgeson, 2007; Edwards & Parry, 1993). We also control for several demographic variables (e.g., tenure in position, educational level, gender, and marital status) that have been linked to mobility constraints and/or withdrawal-related outcomes. Past research has argued that marital status and job tenure tend to be negatively related to ease of movement while education and gender tend to be positively related to ease of movement (Adams & Beehr, 1998; Hom & Griffeth, 1995; Van Hoye & Saks, 2008). Thus we included tenure in job position (in years), educational level (1 – High School Diploma/GED to 6 – Doctorate Degree), marital status (1 = married, 0 = single), and gender (1 = male, 0 = female). This demographic data was collected from the company's personnel records and matched to the respondent survey data.

## 3. Results

Correlations and descriptive statistics are provided in Table 1. Notably, as expected, job search activity negatively correlated with our dependent variables of job satisfaction ( $r = -0.33, p < 0.01$ ), organizational commitment ( $r = -0.19, p < 0.01$ ), and performance ( $r = -0.16, p < 0.01$ ), and positively correlated with neglect behavior ( $r = 0.16, p < 0.01$ ).

The hypotheses were tested using hierarchical regression whereby the control variables (demographics) and the Time 1 assessment of the criterion variable were entered in step 1, followed by job search activity in step 2 (see Tables 2(a) and (b)). In support of Hypothesis 1a and b, job search activity negatively predicted job satisfaction ( $b = -0.09, SE = 0.03, p < 0.01$ ) and organizational commitment ( $b = -0.04, SE = 0.02, p \leq 0.05$ ) (controlling for the Time 1 assessment of those attitudinal variables and demographic variables), supporting a decline in both job satisfaction and commitment associated with greater search activity. These results are shown in Table 2(a) and (b).

As shown in Table 2(c), a similar pattern of results was found for neglect behaviors as the dependent variables but not for performance. In support of Hypothesis 2a, greater search activity associated with subsequent greater neglect behavior ( $b = 0.10, SE = 0.04, p < 0.05$ ), controlling for an employee's prior performance. Hypothesis 2b was not supported.

Hypothesis 3 proposed that searching with the objective to leave would strengthen the effects of search activity on subsequent employee attitudes and behavior. The interaction of search activity and searching to leave was added to the model after controlling for the main effects. As shown in the final step of each model (in Table 2 a through d), none of the interactions were

<sup>2</sup> We were unable to assess initial (Time 1) neglect behavior due to the company's concerns with multiple inquiries of an employee's negative behavior as well as survey length and the potential adverse effects on survey response rate. However, including the other Time 1 job attitudes and performance helps account for initial neglect tendencies and offers insight on the subsequent neglect behavior following job search activity.

**Table 1**  
Descriptive statistics and inter-correlations among study variables.

	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
1. Tenure (Years)	6.60	6.18												
2. Sex (1 = Male)	0.30	0.59	−0.04											
3. Education	3.61	1.39	−0.09*	−0.04										
4. Marital status (1 = married)	0.76	0.43	−0.01	−0.06	−0.01									
5. Job search behavior	2.14	1.34	−0.07	−0.01	0.10*	0.03	(0.92)							
6. Search to leave	3.17	1.56	−0.12*	0.04	0.13**	0.09*	0.68**	(0.88)						
7. Job satisfaction T1	4.30	0.63	−0.05	−0.06	−0.02	0.00	−0.37**	−0.48**	(0.86)					
8. Job satisfaction T2	4.86	0.97	−0.01	−0.01	−0.09*	0.00	−0.33**	−0.45**	0.64**	(0.88)				
9. Organizational commitment T1	4.06	1.15	0.11*	−0.07	−0.15**	−0.01	−0.21**	−0.32**	0.39**	0.43**	(0.76)			
10. Organizational commitment T2	4.24	0.87	0.02	−0.03	−0.08*	0.00	−0.19**	−0.32**	0.39**	0.50**	0.75**	(0.91)		
11. Neglect behavior	1.78	0.70	−0.04	−0.08*	0.01	−0.08*	0.16**	0.21**	−0.25**	−0.30**	−0.23**	−0.28**	(0.78)	
12. Job performance T1	3.16	0.68	0.06	−0.12	−0.03	0.11	−0.13*	−0.09	0.19**	0.17**	0.14*	0.08	−0.14*	
13. Job performance T2	3.16	0.68	0.10	−0.08	0.01	0.13*	−0.16**	−0.16**	0.15**	0.13*	0.13*	0.16**	−0.15**	0.75**

*N* = 622. Estimated reliabilities are in parentheses along the main diagonal.

\* *p* < 0.05.

\*\* *p* < 0.01.

statistically significant. We additionally ran all of our analyses without the control variables and found similar results. Post hoc analysis also examined the variable *intent to quit* (assessed at Time 1) as a possible moderator given that employees with higher initial quit intentions may be more apt to withdraw from the current employer following a failed search. The interaction of intent to quit with search activity was similarly nonsignificant in predicting the dependent variables. Thus, *Hypothesis 3* was not supported.

#### 4. Discussion

This research examined the work-related outcomes of job search activity among employees that end up not leaving an organization (i.e., “stayers”). Drawing on a withdrawal framework, we proposed and found that greater search activity associated with a decrease in subsequent job satisfaction, organizational commitment, as well as an increase in neglect behaviors. Contrary to expectations, these effects were not dependent on the extent to which the employee searched with the objective to leave the current organization.

Results from this study support the notion of a failed job search and recent discussions of “reluctant stayers” (Hom et al., 2012) whereby remaining in a situation where an individual sought to leave is met with declining attitudes and behaviors. Interestingly, it does not appear that greater desire to leave the situation exacerbates the effects of searching and not leaving. Although we expected employees with the specific objective to leave the current employment situation to exhibit particularly negative attitudes and behaviors following a failed search, it appears that the process of searching and not leaving associates with employee detachment and withdrawal regardless of one's initial objectives.

The current study contributes to the job search literature in meaningful ways in that it heeds the call to expand the consequences of job search beyond turnover behavior (Hom et al., 2012). This study begins to examine the job search process with greater detail by highlighting that the job search process is indeed a *process*; in other words, a successful job search may take time and as more time passes with an unsuccessful outcome, the more psychologically detached the employee becomes. Indeed, our findings suggest the fluidity among the proximal withdrawal states of “enthusiastic leaver” and “reluctant stayer” (Hom et al., 2012) by observing that an employee may start out as an enthusiastic leaver by proactively searching for alternative employment but may go through a state of being a reluctant stayer as the job search process prolongs or is unsuccessful. Understanding this fluidity among withdrawal states can help job search research and turnover researchers explain the reasons for cognitive and behavior shifts that can occur in employed job seekers.

#### 5. Limitations and directions for future research

The present study examined the general role of searching and not leaving on subsequent attitudes and behaviors. Yet, it would be important to examine the mechanism by which searchers show a decline in attitudes and subsequent deleterious behaviors. Does the process of searching foster psychological detachment from the current employer? Is there learning that occurs regarding alternative employment and job market characteristics that facilitates the withdrawal process? Does staying in an organization that lacks rewards or other job elements desired by the individual exacerbate withdrawal? Examining “why” searching and staying associates with the withdrawal outcomes seems particularly critical given the null results found here for “searching to leave” (or intent to quit) as a moderating factor. It appears that employees searching to leave are not simply frustrated by a failed

**Table 2**

(a) Regression results of hypothesized relationships between search behavior and job satisfaction T2. (b) Regression results of hypothesized relationships between search behavior and organizational commitment T2. (c) Regression results of hypothesized relationships between search behavior and neglect behavior T2. (d) Regression results of hypothesized relationships between search behavior and job performance T2.

(a)			
Variable	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Intercept	0.39 (0.31)	0.71* (0.33)	1.03** (0.34)
Control variables			
Job satisfaction T1	1.06** (0.06)	0.98** (0.06)	0.89** (0.07)
Tenure (years)	0.00 (0.01)	0.00 (0.01)	0.00 (0.01)
Sex	0.05 (0.06)	0.05 (0.06)	0.05 (0.06)
Education	-0.06* (0.03)	-0.05* (0.03)	-0.04 (0.03)
Marital status	0.05 (0.09)	0.05 (0.09)	0.08 (0.09)
Independent variable			
Job search behavior (A)		-0.09** (0.03)	0.01 (0.05)
Moderator variables			
Search to Leave (B)			-0.11** (0.04)
Two-way interactions			
A × B			-0.02 (0.02)
R <sup>2</sup>	0.44**	0.45**	0.46**
ΔR <sup>2</sup>		0.01**	0.02**
(b)			
Variable	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Intercept	1.88** (0.17)	1.91** (0.17)	1.95** (0.17)
Control variables			
Org. Commitment T1	0.57** (0.02)	0.56** (0.02)	0.54** (0.02)
Tenure (years)	-0.01* (0.00)	-0.01* (0.00)	-0.01* (0.00)
Sex	0.07 (0.05)	0.07 (0.05)	0.07 (0.05)
Education	0.01 (0.02)	0.01 (0.02)	0.01 (0.02)
Marital status	-0.03 (0.06)	-0.03 (0.06)	-0.02 (0.06)
Independent variable			
Job search behavior (A)			0.02 (0.03)
Moderator variables			
Search to leave (B)			-0.07** (0.03)
Two-way interactions			
A × B			0.00 (0.02)
R <sup>2</sup>	0.58**	0.58**	0.59**
ΔR <sup>2</sup>		0.00*	0.01**
(c)			
Variable	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Intercept	2.57** (0.36)	2.51** (0.35)	2.62** (0.35)
Control variables			
Performance T1	-0.17* (0.08)	-0.14 (0.08)	-0.14 (0.08)
Tenure (years)	0.01 (0.01)	0.01 (0.01)	0.01 (0.01)
Sex	-0.10 (0.09)	-0.11 (0.09)	-0.13 (0.09)
Education	0.01 (0.04)	0.01 (0.04)	0.02 (0.04)
Marital status	-0.18 (0.14)	-0.21 (0.14)	-0.23 (0.13)
Independent variable			
Job search behavior (A)		0.10* (0.04)	0.04 (0.06)
Moderator variables			
Search to leave (B)			0.10* (0.05)
Two-way interactions			
A × B			-0.05 (0.03)
R <sup>2</sup>		0.07*	0.12**
ΔR <sup>2</sup>	0.05	0.02*	0.05**
(d)			
Variable	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Intercept	0.74** (0.24)	0.76** (0.24)	0.79** (0.24)
Control variables			
Performance T1	0.72** (0.05)	0.76** (0.24)	0.70** (0.05)
Tenure (years)	0.00 (0.01)	0.71** (0.05)	-0.01 (0.01)
Sex	0.03 (0.06)	0.03 (0.06)	0.03 (0.06)
Education	0.04 (0.03)	0.04 (0.03)	0.05 (0.03)
Marital status	0.10 (0.09)	0.11 (0.09)	0.12 (0.09)

(continued on next page)

Table 2 (continued)

(d) Variable	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Independent variable			
Job search behavior (A)		−0.03 (0.03)	0.02 (0.04)
Moderator variables			
Search to leave (B)			−0.04 (0.03)
Two-way interactions			
A × B			−0.02 (0.02)
R <sup>2</sup>	0.55**	0.55**	0.56**
ΔR <sup>2</sup>		0.00	0.01

All regression coefficients are unstandardized. Standard errors are reported in parentheses.

\*  $p \leq 0.05$ .

\*\*  $p \leq 0.01$ .

search, but rather that something occurs during the search process and/or following the decision to stay that manifests in subsequent declining attitudes and behavior/performance.

Another curious null result was that job search behaviors did not have a significant relationship with performance. Despite this null finding it still contributes to the literature and is in line with calls for academic research to not shy away from nonsignificant findings and that these type of results are informative to the academic and practitioner audiences (Bettis, Ethiraj, Gambardella, Helfat, & Mitchell, 2016). Perhaps employees who unsuccessfully search for a job keep their performance levels acceptable because they know viable alternatives are sparse and do not want to risk losing their current employment. Future research can shed light on the relationship between job search and performance to determine when reluctant stayers result in poor performers and what type of performance (e.g., task vs. contextual) may be affected.

Similarly, the present study did not specifically examine why the individual ended up staying. Indeed, it is not clear whether a particular employee had the option to leave (i.e., we did not capture perceived or actual employment alternatives). Future research should examine the reasons for staying on subsequent employee reactions. It may be that learning that the “grass is not greener” helps to reinforce an employee’s attachment to the current employer while feeling “stuck” perhaps due to low mobility (e.g., high embeddedness, low alternatives) heightens one’s subsequent withdrawal. For example, the relationship between job search and subsequent withdrawal may be accentuated for those who have high levels of continuance commitment. Hom et al. (2012) suggested that those with high levels of continuance commitment (perhaps due to community embeddedness and/or family demands) who are unhappy with their employment may be particularly frustrated because although they have a desire to leave, the costs (financial or personal) of exiting may limit their ability to actually leave.

There were elements of the study design that should be noted when interpreting the results. We assessed employee attitudes and behaviors approximately six weeks following an individual’s search activity; however, we do note that questions regarding job search behaviors referred to behaviors within the previous six months. Although our results revealed a negative change in the work outcomes over time, it is unclear what the longer term outcomes are of the employee searching and staying. We also did not have an initial baseline of neglect behavior to allow us to adequately test the “change” in this variable. Although we controlled for employee performance (at Time 1) and found higher neglect subsequent to search activity, a more complete test of whether and how employee neglect behavior occurs is needed. Certainly future research could benefit from having more than two measures to assess changes in job attitudes and behaviors; longitudinal data can elucidate the process of job search on subsequent employee outcomes (Ployhart & Vandenberg, 2010). Related to the performance data, the organization we studied measured performance on an annual basis and the performance window did not fully coincide with the collection of search activity (i.e., Time 2 performance was assessed five months after search activity but the supervisor was also reflecting on an individual’s performance for a time period before search activity). Again, assessing the long-term performance of an employee that searches and stays would be important. In addition, we assessed overall performance with a single-item measure. Although this measure was taken from organizational records and was the performance assessment from supervisors used in the annual performance review, we acknowledge that the reliability is uncertain and it may not capture all the facets of employee performance. Future research would benefit from having more robust measures of performance when investigating the job search behaviors. Finally, the present study examined employees from one organization (staff employees of a public university) which may limit the generalizability of the results. These employees enjoy relatively stable and secure employment and may be somewhat limited in their employment options given the surrounding labor market. Similarly, we might expect differences across occupations, perhaps due to differing unemployment rates, that might affect an individual’s ability (and length of time needed) to obtain new employment. This further reinforces the value of examining why a searcher stays on subsequent attitudes and behaviors.

## 6. Practical implications

The key purpose of this study was to examine whether retention is necessarily a win for an employer. Focusing on the link between search activity and subsequent work attitudes and behaviors, our results suggest that retention may not be universally positive. These findings certainly support the important role of search behavior as part of the employee withdrawal process, revealing that employees that seek alternatives but end up not leaving may adapt to the situation of staying with that employer via



deleterious reactions. This suggests the value of employers assessing potential employee search activity either via climate surveys or by careful observation of search indicators such as changes in behavior, references to the job market, or active search activity on-line or missing work. Additionally, thwarting the onset of search behavior by engaging proactive practices (e.g., hiring for fit, socialization, identifying and communicating internal opportunities to employees) likely to discourage employees from seeking external opportunities in the first place would be particularly valuable.

Given searching and staying may be met with adaptive withdrawal-related behavior, it may not always be desirable for an employer to take actions to retain employees. For example, encouraging individuals that are dissatisfied or display poor fit with the employer or matching alternative offers in the hopes of retaining an individual (cf. Boswell et al., 2004) may have a downside in the form of declining organizational attachment and performance. On the other hand, for employees that might be particularly critical for an organization to retain, changes in job attitudes and/or behavior over time should offer insight on where extra efforts may be needed to perhaps thwart further search activity and/or reengage the employee. Employers may reengage job searchers through methods such as job crafting exercises and job redesign interventions (Grant & Parker, 2009; Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001) in order to not only retain employees but also improve employees' overall attitudes and commitment toward their jobs.

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