Career Mobility and Branding in the Civil Service: An Empirical Study

By Jack K. Ito

Introduction

This article is concerned with recruiting, mobility patterns, exploring organizational conditions that influence career dimensions such as promotion stress, and predicting intended turnover. Human resource management is challenged by demographic trends as “baby boomers” approach retirement to be replaced by “new age” employees, and labor demand exceeds supply, exacerbating existing concerns about the age distribution within the civil service. These trends magnify the effects of an increasingly calculative individual – organization relationship, and concerns about career security and mobility, including voluntary turnover. Understanding career issues helps in developing and retaining employees and, by improving practices, contributes to organizational image and the ability to attract applicants.

A brand evokes emotional and rational expectations of a product or service, and provides information that distinguishes the brand from its competitors (e.g. the Nike logo in sports products). The brand concept, extended to human resource practices, enables organizations to differentiate themselves from their competitors in the labour market. For example, 3M supports its innovation strategy through such HR practices as allowing individuals to devote up to 15% of their time on their own projects. These practices, publicized through the media, facilitate recruiting applicants attracted by such work environments. Moreover, organizations may seek to change public perceptions about the reality of their human resource practices and the nature of the work environment. To be effective, branding must reflect the reality of the work environment and HR policies, otherwise, the contradictions may be viewed as unethical and serve to discourage potential applicants.

Some answers to the following questions may help organizations in the public sector to improve the career opportunities of their staff and to help develop a “brand strategy” to enhance the effectiveness of recruitment and retention policies.

- What aspects of civil service careers may help attract applicants and to retain existing staff?
- What are some characteristics of careers and mobility patterns in the civil service?
- How can organizations improve the opportunities for meaningful careers?

The study

This paper is based on a sample drawn from technical, professional, and managerial staff, where recruitment and retention pose the most concern, from several Government Departments in Western Canada. The sample size of 310 respondents consists of 172 non-supervisory staff, 88 first-line supervisors or managers, and 49 second-line managers or above. Of the sample, 291 were permanent employees, and 19 were term employees. For other information see content note.
1. A majority of the questions have been employed verbatim or slightly modified from other studies. The remaining items were written specifically for this study based upon the literature and on discussions with HR professionals. Most of the items were measured on a 5-point scale, with only the end points described. These were 1 = strongly agree; 5 = strongly disagree and 1 = very great extent; 5 = very little extent. In the analysis, the mean of the scores is presented, followed by the percentage scoring either (1) or (2). The sample characteristics are provided in the content footnote 1. They are quite similar to those found in a 1999 publication on career development in the Canadian federal public service. Many of the questions regarding seeking positions and mobility in the public service were either taken or deduced from statements in this publication.4

Seeking positions in the public service

In investigating why people are attracted to the public sector, some studies use easily communicated factors such as income, job security and the desire to help others and be useful to society.5 Other studies concern organizational conditions that are hard to describe to the public (e.g., quality of supervisor – employee relations). 6 In this study the respondents were asked why they joined the public service. In descending order of importance, the reasons were: (1) timing of the job offer was right (1.57; 89%); (2) opportunity to apply academic background and related education (2.18; 69%); (3) career opportunities within the public service (2.71; 48%); (4) extent to which private or non profit jobs were seriously considered (2.79; 47%); (5) salary (2.85; 41%); (5) opportunity to serve the public (2.85; 41%); and (6) the good reputation of the Department making the offer (3.17; 29%). While this was not a study of recent recruits, there were no age or experience effects, a finding consistent with a recent study.7

The importance of timing suggests the need for rapid decision-making, perhaps through greater decentralization of the selection process; and the desire to use one’s academic background implies the importance of early job – person fit. That 47% of respondents had been attracted by non-public service positions indicates the need for aggressive recruiting at post secondary institutions. However, 30% of the respondents did not seriously consider the private or not for profit sector; and serving the public was as important as salary. This predisposition for public service positions may inform branding in recruitment strategy. Once recruited, this sample of public employees sought career paths largely within the public service, implying that once hired, continued investments in knowledge and skills helped to retain their services.

About 51% of the respondents had been employed full time in the private or not for profit sectors: 19 entered as managers and 139 as professional or technical staff. Their experience in adapting to the public sector is an important consideration from both the individual and the employer perspective.

Table 1
Adapting to the public sector

| Past experience related to work in Department? | 2.37 65% |
| Transfer knowledge from past experience to Department? | 1.66 86% |
| Adapt to Department in a reasonable length of time? | 1.67 90% |
Adjustment took about as much effort as expected before accepting position? 2.31 61%

Respondents generally had little difficulty in adapting to the public service environment, a fact that may help in recruiting individuals currently in the private or not-for-profit sectors. However, this interpretation is tempered since it is unknown how easy or difficult the transition might have been for those who entered, then left the public service. Moreover, the reasons why they were attracted did not differ from those who began their careers in the public sector, except for their search in the private or not for profit sector (2.53 versus 3.05; indicating greater consideration of these sectors) and their ability to apply knowledge and skills (2.03 versus 2.33). Interestingly, there was no difference regarding the opportunity to serve the public. Thus, it appears that those who moved from the private or not for profit sectors were motivated strongly by the ability to apply their previously acquired knowledge, skills, and abilities. Therefore the message that the public service offers opportunities that the other sectors may not, may be quite effective. It may be useful to research questions such as how specific opportunities provide a competitive advantage to the public sector. While speculative, it may be easier for individuals in the private or not-for-profit sectors to move into the public service than vice versa (easy transition into the public service but reluctance to leave).

The study was also concerned with why people sought their current position.

Table 2
Reasons for seeking the current position

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reason</th>
<th>Staff</th>
<th>Supervisors</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Better utilized knowledge, skills, and abilities</td>
<td>2.02  75%</td>
<td>1.87  83%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Higher level of responsibility</td>
<td>2.80  46%</td>
<td>2.08  80%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Higher salary</td>
<td>2.93  44%</td>
<td>2.55  58%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greater contribution to the public service</td>
<td>2.93  38%</td>
<td>2.42  57%</td>
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</table>

The use of knowledge and skills remained a significant factor in seeking positions within the public service. The finding that supervisors sought management positions to satisfy needs for exercising responsibility is consistent with literature in this area. And, service to the public sector remains a “background” variable. Moreover, managers and supervisors feel they can adapt to other positions quite easily. The responses to the questions are as follows: (1) My management KSA enable me to have many career options in the civil service (2.71; 41% agreeing); (2) My management KSA can be applied to other Departments (2.03; 78%); and (3) I can learn specifics of other Departments in reasonable length of time (1.67; 87%). The response to the last question is surprising since they later respond that knowledge of the work unit is important to their effectiveness as supervisors. These results suggest that, while they may be optimistic, managers and supervisors feel that they are mobile and seek growth in using their knowledge and skills and in higher levels of responsibility. These are both factors in retaining individuals, as well as a “story” around which a recruitment and retention campaign can be developed.

Mobility
Individual career plans are integral in understanding mobility. Three years was chosen as an appropriate time horizon, based upon advice received from human resource management professionals. The question posed below was asked in which 1 = very great extent and 5 = very little extent. A subsequent analysis sought to find clusters of individuals (e.g. those who wished to be promoted and simultaneously did not wish to remain in the current position). Both types of information may help to identify issues that HR systems may address.

The following question was asked: In three years time, would you like to be working …. (non-supervisors). The responses were as follows: same position (2.83; 45%); different position with no supervisory responsibility (3.21; 28%); and position with supervisory responsibility (2.79; 49%). Using responses 1 or 2 as indicating desirability of a position 3 years from now; and 3, 4, or 5 as indicating indifference or undesirability of the position, four clusters of individuals were formed based on their attitudes toward promotion and remaining in the same position. The number of respondents is lower than the sample size as many individuals did not respond to all questions. The clusters, based on 156 respondents was as follows: (1) desire promotion to supervisor (54); (2) wish to stay in the same position (46); (3) both promotion and staying are desirable (22); and (4) neither are desirable (34). Those in category 4 are more favourable to moving to a lateral career move.

The same question was asked of supervisors. Their responses were: same position (2.78; 51%); same level – different position (3.20; 31%); higher supervisory level (2.47; 54%); and less supervisory responsibility (3.94; 17%). The clusters, based on 118 respondents was as follows: (1) desire promotion (40); (2) wish to stay in the same position (42); (3) both promotion and staying are desirable (19); and neither desirable (17). Those in category 4 are more favourable to a lateral move or position with less responsibility.

The data promotion on seeking promotion is an indicator of the supply available to fill positions as they become vacant and the demand for training and support programs to assist in the transition, especially for staff promoted to supervisor. Data presented later will suggest the potential need for further training and assistance in the transition process. On the other hand, there are many who are relatively dissatisfied – wishing neither a promotion nor to stay in the present position (22% of non-supervisors and 14% of supervisors). This suggests the importance of developing systems for lateral movement and, for supervisors, the opportunity to move into more technical positions or otherwise less supervisory responsibilities.

**Barriers to development**

The need for individual mobility within the organization is growing, and, the responsibility for career planning has shifted from organization to employee, a philosophy in which job security resides in one’s own career resilience – one’s ability to adapt to changing circumstances. Thus, it is important to understand how employees perceive mobility issues in order to meet individual growth aspirations as well to meet organizational needs. The opportunity for career mobility may attract applicants and help to retain employees. The following data addresses barriers to development and to career progress, and management of the transition from rank and file to supervisor.
Respondents were asked to identify which factors served as barriers to their own development; and supervisors were asked to indicate which factors served as barriers to their subordinates’ development. An individual could check any number of the items. The scores represent the number of times the item was checked and the percentage of the total.

Table 3
Barriers to development

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Own development</th>
<th>Subordinates’ development</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>N=310</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Difficult to free up time</td>
<td>183 (62%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of funding by government to support programs</td>
<td>163 (55%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Future requirements for jobs are unclear</td>
<td>107 (36%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of knowledge about programs available</td>
<td>105 (35%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of useful programs</td>
<td>99 (33%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not clear which programs will be useful</td>
<td>99 (33%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respondent is unclear about career direction (for non-supervisors 36%)</td>
<td>88 (30%)</td>
</tr>
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</table>

The difficulties in freeing up time and funding are the most important blockages. However, while 36% of non-supervisors indicate that they are unclear about their career direction, 60% of supervisors identified this reason as a barrier for their staff. This finding is consistent with the lack of interaction between supervisor and subordinate regarding career issues, discussed later in the paper. And, given the scarcity of time and funding, the uncertainty and disagreement about career aspirations may cause ineffective allocation of these resources.

The study also measured the extent to which a number of factors which prevented people from taking advantage of career opportunities. In each case, the scale read “Regarding future career opportunities in the Provincial public service, to what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?” (1 = strongly agree; 5 = strongly disagree)

Table 4
Barriers to career progress

<p>| | |</p>
<table>
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<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Few openings of interest</td>
<td>2.39 (55%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A lot of competition for positions I am interested in</td>
<td>2.56 (47%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Difficult to know qualifications needed in future</td>
<td>2.92 (40%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Systems do not measure my qualifications accurately</td>
<td>2.77 (38%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Qualifications not known to decision makers</td>
<td>2.80 (37%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Insufficient experience</td>
<td>3.38 (23%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Categorized as specialist or difficult to replace</td>
<td>3.50 (22%)</td>
</tr>
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</table>

The two highest barriers are few openings of interest and competition for these positions. While each is important by itself, the combination is of greater concern. Of the 305 responding to this question, 32% strongly agree or agree that there are few positions of interest and there is a
lot of competition for these positions. This compared with only 4% who strongly disagreed or disagreed with both statements. In particular, this suggests that the promotion and transfer process needs to be both transparent and easily explained, otherwise, feelings of inequity and dissatisfaction may arise. Moreover, the scores on qualifications may suggest some difficulties, with 37 or 38% of respondents indicating that they strongly agreed or agreed that these represented barriers to their career progress. And, 24% strongly agreed or agreed to both statements versus 13% who strongly disagreed or disagreed with both statements.

**Transitions from rank and file to supervisor**

The study asked questions of the experiences and attitudes of first line supervisors who were promoted from within the Department (N = 41). The information may assist in identifying issues that may be of concern in the transition from staff to supervisory positions. The first question was: To what extent did the following play a role in seeking the position? The following are the responses: believed that technical / professional expertise would help in becoming an effective manager (2.26; 67%); position was part of a career plan (1.93; 88%); and progress in a technical /professional role didn’t seem enough (2.54; 51%). These findings are consistent with reasons for seeking the current position discussed earlier.

The transition from staff to supervisory positions requires the development of a different skill set, and may be stressful if the transition is not handled carefully. The questions (1 = to a very great extent; 5 = very little extent) were:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Score</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Technical / professional background important to managing unit</td>
<td>1.95</td>
<td>88%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Managerial role is more ambiguous than professional role</td>
<td>1.98</td>
<td>76%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good balance between managerial and technical roles</td>
<td>2.56</td>
<td>51%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spending too much time on technical work of the unit</td>
<td>3.24</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adequately prepared in managerial processes before taking the job</td>
<td>2.98</td>
<td>32%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organization helped you in the transition</td>
<td>3.17</td>
<td>32%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>You knew “what you were getting into”</td>
<td>2.76</td>
<td>54%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

There are some themes important to understanding career transitions. First, supervisors promoted from within believe that technical experience is important to managing a unit. While the data indicated that people hired into the civil service from outside were able to adapt easily, the vast majority of these individuals entered at the technical or professional level. Thus, there may be difficulties in bringing in people as managers from outside the public service. Second, respondents indicated that the nature of the work is more ambiguous, but that they were not as prepared in managerial processes as they might have been (32% strongly agreeing or agreeing that they were adequately prepared) and that the organization did not provide a high level of
support in the transition (32% strongly agreeing or agreeing). Thus, given the expected changes in staffing, with anticipated promotions to handle retirements, it appears that there is an opportunity for improved transition management.

Attitudes, career characteristics, and organizational factors

This section of the paper considers three attitudes (turnover intentions, commitment, and promotion stress); four characteristics about careers (career development activities, flexibility, control, and the extent to which one’s contributions are recognized), and supervisory support. This is followed by a discussion of how the variables are associated with one another (Figure 1). These variables are each composed of several items, the scale reliabilities ranged from acceptable to very high. Factor analysis (varimax rotation) was used to group items into variables. In the following discussion, the means and the percentage of those either strongly agreeing or agreeing to a statement are presented. Because the means will fall between integers, it was necessary to round off in order to provide this information. The procedure is illustrated by using the data from the commitment variables in content note 2. Unlike the previous questions, for the attitudes, characteristics, and factors, the scales were reversed: the higher the score, the greater the presence of the characteristic.

Three attitudes about the career

While searching for a new job is associated with negative affect, such as job dissatisfaction, it can also be part of a career plan, a simple desire for variety, or be unrelated to the job (e.g. spouse leaving the city). The costs associated when people leave the organization are high, where investments are lost, but where search is within the Department or the public service, the overall system may benefit. The voluntary turnover measure was composed of three items, including “I am planning to search for a new job during the next 12 months”. The score was 2.72, with 54% strongly disagreeing or disagreeing that they are seeking career options. Those aged 26 – 35 were more likely to search, with those with a high school education the least likely to search. As would be expected, people seeking promotion, or indifferent to promotion or remaining in the job, were more likely to search.

To explore where they would search, respondents were asked, “If you are thinking of a search for another position - how likely would you search for a position in (sector)”: the scale ends were definitely likely to definitely unlikely. The number of respondents was 268. The responses were: within the Department (2.37; 61%); the public sector (2.07; 75%); the not for profit sector (3.39; 27%); and the private sector (3.03; 38%). Thus, the search favors the public sector and the Department. As would be expected, those with less desire to search (scores less than or equal to 2.33) had different patterns of search than those with more desire (scores greater or equal to 3.33). The scores were Department (2.06 vs 2.66); public service (2.22 vs 1.87); not for profit (3.71 vs 3.33), and private (3.41 vs 2.71), respectively. Thus, while the likelihood of individuals leaving the Department increased, the preference was to remain in the public service. Those aged 26-35 had the lowest scores for the private sector (2.46), indicating they were likely to search in this sector, but they would also search for an internal position (2.24). This pattern was also observed for those seeking promotions and those indifferent to both promotions and the current position. Moreover, those who originally held positions in the private or not for profit
sectors had similar scores to those who reported they came directly to government. Thus, those planning career changes prefer to seek positions either within the Department or in the civil service generally. The implication is that once a career is underway, there are strong tendencies to remain within the public sector. This may reflect investments in knowledge and skills in the public service and/or a preference for working in a large organization, among other reasons. However, the data shows that the private sector is attractive to those who are younger, those seeking promotion, as well as those who may be disaffected. This implies that if the search for desirable positions is not met in the civil service, expanding the search to the private sector may become more attractive. This places further emphasis upon the need for a good match early in the career, especially for “new age” employees.

While organizational commitment has been studied for a long time as an important variable on its own, it is becoming increasingly important as a means of countering the effects of mobility on turnover and turnover intentions. Commitment to the public service was measured by two items, for example, “I am proud to be part of the Provincial public service”; and commitment to the Department was measured by three items, for example, “This Department has a great deal of personal meaning for me”. The scores were: public service (3.89; 68% strongly agreeing or agreeing); and for the Department (3.47; 50%). While the commitment to public sector appears higher than the commitment to the Department, the questions are different, with the latter implying a more affective attachment (e.g. above – personal meaning). These two variables are highly correlated. There were no significant differences by gender, age, education, or type of position (rank and file versus supervisory). The least committed are those who seek promotion. The most committed are supervisors who wish to remain in the same position and non-supervisors who are positive about both remaining and being promoted.

Promotion stress, concerned with a lack of career progress, has received little empirical attention, with the first scale developed only recently. This variable is an indicator of the difficulties and strains experienced by a lack of career progress and may be associated with turnover intentions. While much literature concerns developing attitudes toward promotion more consistent with today’s organizational reality of flatter structures, nonetheless, the desire for promotion remains relatively high (as shown previously). The four items included “Not being promoted has caused me a great deal of tension”. The importance of this variable is that a high degree of stress and collaterally, disappointment, can lead to voluntary turnover, as well as a lack of commitment (as shown later in the development of a model of cause and effect). The average score is 2.43, with 16% strongly agreeing or agreeing that career progress is a concern. Compared with the average of 3.07 in a study of 229 MBA graduates this figure appears to be quite low, suggesting that promotion stress is not a problem overall, but is a problem for some individuals. Females reported lower levels of promotion stress than did males. However, supervisors and managers who either (a) seek promotion and do not wish to remain in their current position or (b) do not seek promotion nor wish to remain in their current position, report the highest levels of stress. These levels are significantly higher than those who wish to remain in their current position.

Career characteristics
One theme in the HR field is that individuals should develop a broad range of knowledge, skills, and abilities in order to enhance their mobility within and outside the organization. Moreover, individuals are encouraged to take the initiative in developing these resources and to develop career plans. Today security resides more in the ability to adapt to changes, such as restructuring, and to take advantage of opportunities, rather than a “contract” with the employer. Career development activities consisted on 4 items: sample item: “the extent to which you look for job assignments that will help you meet your career goals”. Career flexibility was measured by 2 items: sample item: “I feel that my knowledge, skills, and abilities make me flexible in pursuing career prospects”. As noted earlier, individuals were motivated to seek their current positions to better utilize their mix of KSA. A second theme is the ability of individuals to plan their careers and to predict what they will be doing in the short term. Career control was measured by 3 items: sample item: “I feel that I am in control of my career”. Finally, the promotion process normally includes assessments of work performance and other types of contributions, such as “good citizenship” behaviors. Moreover, our normal beliefs that contributions ought to be appropriately recognized suggest the importance of the fairness of appraisals and recognition of contributions. Appropriate recognition was measured by 4 items: sample item, “The effort I put into the job is recognized”. The scores were: career development activities (3.88; 78% agreeing that they engaged in activities); career flexibility (3.79; 67%); career control (3.18; 41%); and appropriate recognition (3.32; 52%). Supervisors seeking promotion reported the weakest level of appropriate recognition.

**Supervisory roles**

The role of the supervisory in developing their staff’s careers and in fostering commitment has been extensively researched. There are several ways that supervisors help their staff to develop their careers. The first is direct support in career planning, for example, through mentoring and in setting developmental goals in performance appraisals. This variable was measured by 8 items: sample items: My supervisor “Takes the time to learn about my career goals and aspirations” and “Encourages me to plan my career”. The second is through providing on-going feedback that helps individuals to improve their performance and address their weaknesses. This variable was measured by 2 items: sample item: “Gives you helpful feedback about your performance”. Finally, on-going support of staff decisions and performance may provide visibility, as well as encouraging initiatives and higher performance: measured by 3 items: sample item: “Makes sure you get the credit when you accomplish something substantial on the job”. The scores were: support of career (2.95; 22%), providing feedback (3.29; 46%), and support in decision-making (3.80; 65% agreement). The latter two variables were combined as supervisor’s support of work; and all three variables were combined into the overall variable “supervisory support” in testing the model. This variable had a mean of 3.57. The score on the one item measure of career counseling “All in all, I am satisfied with the career counseling I have received” was 2.41, with only 15% agreement with the statement. Supervisors seeking promotion reported the lowest level of direct career support and satisfaction with career counseling.

**Relationships among the variables**
Managers and professionals are concerned about theory that guides actions. For example, people are concerned about questions such as: How can commitment be increased? How can intended turnover be reduced? How can career flexibility be improved so people can become more mobile? Some variables can be addressed directly – for example, career flexibility can be improved by providing more training and more information on what types of positions will be available in the future. However, other variables, such as reducing turnover, have to be approached indirectly – by changing commitment and other variables related to turnover.

This study is cross-sectional, that is, individuals completed just one questionnaire, rather than two or more instruments separated by time. Thus, one cannot conclude that one variable “causes” another, but only that they are associated. In the following discussion, the directions (one variable causes another) are based on theories developed in the extensive literature on careers and stress. Furthermore, one can only say that the model has been supported by the data – other models could also apply – there can also be feedback loops. To make use of as much data as possible in testing the model, the standard practice of using the sample average of an item to estimate missing values was followed.

The size of the sample is moderate for studies among relationships. The correlation matrix (Table 6) shows the relationships among the variables. A model or pattern of “cause and effect” (Figure 1) was developed and tested using the computer program AMOS. The paths shown are those found to be significant: hypothesized paths that were not supported and paths found in the data but which were not hypothesized have been excluded. This model was a good fit to the data: p = .07; Chi-square = 30.3, 20 degrees of freedom; Chi-square / df = 1.51; CFI = .999; and RMSEA = .04. The regression weights are provided in Table 7. Some of the variables shown in the correlation matrix were not used in the model in order to emphasize relationships that appear to be most important. Many of these relationships will make “common sense” and simply reinforce beliefs that are widely held, and some have been well researched (e.g. commitment to turnover). However, others may be relatively new, and hopefully, provide some insight to guide actions that will lead to desired results.

Groupings of variables

The model proposes that commitment to the Department and promotion stress will be primary predictors of the intention to search. These are attitudes and can only be indirectly influenced. Commitment to the public is not included since one item overlapped significantly with staying with the organization. The model showed that the higher the promotion stress, the greater the intention to search; and the higher the commitment, the lower the intention to search. The variance explained in the intention to search (in total – as we shall discuss two other factors also play a role) was 30.0 %, which is quite high (if the four variables predicted the intention to leave completely, the variance explained would be 100%). Other factors such as investments in organizationally specific knowledge or a desire to relocate also play a significant role in understanding turnover intentions.

The model proposed, and found, that promotion stress would be negatively correlated with commitment to the Department; and supervisory support and appropriate recognition would be positively associated with commitment. Appropriate recognition and career control were
negatively associated with promotion stress. The ability to control one’s career is negatively associated with emotional exhaustion, a form of stress that decreases commitment and increases turnover.\textsuperscript{28} The variances explained in commitment and promotion stress were 23.6\% and 31.4\%, respectively.

Appropriate recognition and career flexibility were both positively associated with career control. That one’s contributions are valued provides direction in how one should invest or continue to invest resources such as time and effort.\textsuperscript{29} Career flexibility provides a sense of control by helping people to be adaptable.\textsuperscript{30} In the face of uncertainty, one’s range of KSA provides the basis for adapting to circumstances. The variance explained is 19.7\%, which is reasonably high. Some time ago, people often had “jobs for life”, and could rely upon the organization for security. Now, one’s career flexibility provides security and a sense of career control by facilitating adaptability and mobility.

Supervisory support predicted appropriate recognition as expected.\textsuperscript{31} The variance explained, 41.2\%, is high. Career flexibility is predicted by career development activities: individual efforts to broaden knowledge and skills result in the ability to take on other positions. Secondly, supervisory support, by providing feedback and encouraging development, predicts career development activities and flexibility. The variances explained in career flexibility and career development activities were 22.8\% and 9.4\%, respectively. Thus, the supervisor plays a significant role in individuals experiencing recognition and career mobility. However, the greater the extent to which people invest in broadening their KSA, the more they feel they are mobile, and the more likely they are to search for another position. This relationship has been found before.\textsuperscript{32} This means that investments to develop individuals can result in their leaving their position, however, if commitment remains high, it is likely that the search will be within the public service – and therefore facilitate government services as a whole, though perhaps not the work unit in particular.

Other findings

Participation in decision-making (PDM) was measured by the frequency of participation in 4 types of decisions (e.g., work assigned to the work unit).\textsuperscript{33} The issue of capacity in policy making and policy implementation are not addressed in this study. Autonomy was measured by 4 items (e.g., for supervisors - I can use my personal initiative or judgment in managing the work unit; for non-supervisors - I can use my personal initiative or judgment in carrying out the work; and for both, “I feel my supervisor doesn’t delegate enough”).\textsuperscript{34} The scores were for those without supervisory responsibilities: autonomy (3.95; 75\%) and PDM (3.08; 41\%); and for supervisors and managers: autonomy (3.87; 71\%) and PDM (3.60; 60\%). This data indicates a relatively high level of autonomy experienced by both supervisors and non-supervisors. While the scores on participation seem relatively low, a study in the Federal public service found an average of 3.22 for the same set of items.\textsuperscript{35} However, the autonomy scores indicate a significant level of freedom and discretion in task performance, a factor related to commitment and a lack of stress. As shown in the correlation matrix, supervisor’s support of their subordinates’ career, and their support of the subordinates’ work are related to both participation and autonomy. This is expected, and reflects a management philosophy often called “high involvement” and “high commitment” approaches to leadership in organizations.
Two barriers to career progress, “The systems for managing promotions and transfers do not accurately measure my qualifications” and “My qualifications are not well known to those who make decisions on promotions and transfers” were combined into a variable. This variable, intended to measure systemic effects, was not included in the model, as it overlaps with “fairness and recognition.” As shown in the table of correlations, it is strongly related to promotion stress and to career control.

In developing careers, the availability of training programs is important. Respondents were asked about their access to effective training and development programs with respect to three questions. A sample question is: “enable me to be more flexible in the types of work I can do in the future”. The mean score was 3.16, with 40% indicating that they either strongly agreed or agreed that they had sufficient access to training and development programs.

Concluding Comments

This research addressed several questions posed at the beginning of the paper. The following are some selected points that may be useful in identifying strategies to recruit, retain and facilitate employee career mobility.

- People are principally attracted by the timing of offers and the opportunity to apply their knowledge and skills, which is also the principal reason for seeking new positions within the public service.

- While the public sector competes with the private sector in initial hiring, once hired, the tendency to remain in the public service appears to be quite strong. Development of career paths that cross unit and Departmental borders (and, perhaps inter-governmental boundaries) may take advantage of accumulated competencies. Moreover, since career opportunities were important in attracting individuals, the prospect of a career in the public service may be a useful recruitment tactic. However, better educated and younger people, especially early in their careers may seek private and not for profit positions, an issue arising from the “workforce of the future”.

- Those entering the public service from permanent positions in the private and not for profit sectors report little difficulty in adapting (with the caveat that many who experienced difficulties may not have remained for long or otherwise did not complete the questionnaire). However, supervisors indicated that understanding the technical work of the unit was important, suggesting that recruiting at the technical and professional level may be more productive than at the managerial levels.

- Generally, while many individuals seek promotion, many wish to remain in their present positions for the next three years. While a numerical balance between these groups is desirable since mobility ambitions need to be matched to openings, attention may be paid to those who neither seek promotion nor wish to remain in their current position.
The demographic patterns suggest a high level of career movement over the next several years. This suggests the importance of managing transitions to first line supervisory positions.

This paper has reported on a number of attitudes. While the results may assist in assessing potential intra-organizational mobility and developing retention strategies, the data indicates that the public service may fulfill many personal needs. Moreover, several of these characteristics may counter prevailing attitudes about work in the public sector, and may be useful in recruiting. More specifically, these characteristics may attract “new age” employees. The data suggested that respondents:

- Are committed to the public service and to the Department. The measurement of commitment made it difficult to compare with other studies.
- Feel they are adaptable to changing circumstances, that is, report high levels of career resilience. (mean of 1.77 with 93% agreement).
- Engage in many individual career development activities, despite some problems in receiving enough training and development opportunities. They report relatively high levels of career flexibility and control, and feel they will be mobile within the Department and public service. Supervisors and managers are confident in their ability to move to other positions, including those in other Departments.
- Report relatively low levels of promotion stress.
- Report high levels of autonomy.

The findings suggest the important role played by supervisory support, and, moreover, the relatively low level of involvement in their staff’s careers.

- While supervisor’s support of work decisions, such as giving credit and familiarity with the staff’s work, was relatively high, supervisory feedback on performance and providing advice about improving performance appeared somewhat low, with supervisors’ involvement in their subordinates’ careers still lower. This was consistent with the low satisfaction with career counseling. This is also consistent with the common belief that managers may be less inclined toward the “softer” side of management than toward the more technical side.

- Supervisors who were seeking promotions and those (supervisors and non-supervisors) who neither sought promotion nor wished to remain in their current positions reported significantly lower scores on supervisory support of career than those in the other groups. The sizeable minority in this group represents a challenge to HR units. Moreover, supervisors seeking promotion scored significantly lower in their perceptions of appropriate recognition than other supervisors. The pattern suggests that a particularly important group – supervisors who wish to be promoted – may be a target for HR interventions.
This report identifies some opportunities for improving career mobility within the public service, through such approaches as succession planning and talent management. The data suggested potential for significant improvement in career counseling and involvement of supervisors in the career development process. The model demonstrated the pervasive effect that supervisory support has on career development activities, career flexibility and resilience, and on the fairness of appraisal and recognition of contributions. While the respondents reported individual initiatives in career development, they may benefit from greater support, including more information about the nature and distribution of positions in the future. There are many reasons why supervisors may not provide career support, including time availability, a lack of knowledge about opportunities, a desire to avoid the type of personal counseling which people may seek, and the responsibility of providing direction in an uncertain situation. However, there is room for improvement on providing feedback and helping people improve their performance. This problem has also been found in other studies, and is consistent with the research suggesting that supervisors often avoid providing negative feedback in performance appraisals. Perhaps other systems may be developed to provide this type of support. Such support may be crucial in retaining younger staff, who are more likely to pursue opportunities outside the public sector, since the fit between academic education and the job appears important.

The importance of fairness in the appraisal system and recognition of contributions is also highlighted in the model. This variable predicts promotion stress, which predicts both commitment to the Department and to intended search for new opportunities. While a function of supervisory support, this variable is also related to perceptions of the promotion and transfer systems themselves. While not the greatest blocks to careers, such systems have been reported in other studies of the public service as being difficult to understand and needlessly complex. In some situations, the extensive use of tests compared with the use of measures of job related experience and knowledge, may have caused difficulties.

It is clear that the civil service faces significant challenges from many different directions. These challenges include the structure and process of service delivery, necessitating a flexible workforce, and the influx of employees whose motivations may not be so different from those they replace, but who will have expectations consistent with the new reality of a more calculative employment relationship. More specifically, “new age” employees may act like the younger employees in this study by seeking alternative employment in the private sector in their search for a satisfying career. Organizations may have to live with the dilemma of investing in their staff’s KSA only to find that mobility enables them to find jobs elsewhere. However, measures taken to enhance their commitment may counter this pattern. Finally, recruitment and mobility patterns may be influenced by knowledge characteristics (such as organizationally specific versus general forms of expertise) and different organizational arrangements, such as the extent to which the organization employs the external market versus internal development. However, if the public service continues to re-structure using market approaches (buy rather than make), and provides minimal security, it is likely to face high turnover rates, despite its attempts to enhance commitment.
Limitations

The relatively small and regional distribution of the sample prevents generalizations about the issues. However, the findings suggest further areas for investigation or at least discussion about potential actions that might be taken. The study was cross sectional, rather than longitudinal, and therefore suffers from the inability to directly support causal inferences. Moreover, the use of only questionnaires may have led to some common methods variance. The model of relationships, however, fits previous research, and the sample size is similar to those of many other studies.

Content Notes

Note 1

Some of the sample characteristics follow, including a comparison with data from a survey of the Federal Public Service (note 3). The average age was 44.6 years, compared with 44 in the Duxbury study; average public service was 13.6 years, with 35% having more than 20 years of service. This compares with the average of 17 years in the Duxbury study. The difference may be due to the percentage of people who previously held full time positions in the private or not for profit sectors (51% in this study). The percentage of females was 61.5%, relatively high. The distribution of non-supervisory versus supervisory respondents by gender revealed that 66 of the 119 males (55.5%) were supervisors whereas 70 of the 189 females (37%) were supervisors. The corresponding figures from the Duxbury study are 54% and 37%. The highest level of formal education were: high school (7.1%); some post secondary (12.6%), college or technical school diploma (19.0%); university degree (41.6%) and post graduate degree (19.7%). The 61.3% completing at least one university degree compares with the 64% in the Duxbury study. Thus except for the gender percentage and time in the public service, this study’s sample corresponds closely with the much larger Duxbury study.

Commitment to the Department is a 3 item variable, and the individual scores range from 1 to 5, in increments of .33 (e.g. 2.00, 2.33, 2.67, 3.00). The average for the 309 people who responded to the questions is 2.53. Since 2.33 is closer to 2 than to 3, and 50% of the respondents scored 2.33 or below, the statement is: “the average score was 2.53, with 50% of respondents either strongly agreeing or agreeing…”

Note 2

Commitment to the public service is a two item variable, the individual scores range from 1 to 5 in increments of .5. The average of the scores is 2.11. Of the 309 respondents, 186 scored 1, 1.5, or 2. And, 51 scored 2.5. Since 2.5 is squarely in the middle of 1 and 2, half of the 51 people were classified as a “2” and half as a “3”. Since 309 respondents answered the public service commitment items, the average score is 2.11, and 68% strongly agreed or agreed [(186 + 25.5) divided by 309].

Notes

7 Ibid.
10 Abbasi & Hollman, op.cit.
12 Capelli, op.cit., Mir, Mir, & Mosca, op.cit.
15 Ibid.
22 Source unknown, items similar to those in Wayne, Shore, & Liden, op.cit.


27 Meyer, Stanley, Herscovitch, & Topolnytsky, ibid.

28 Ito & Brotheridge, op.cit.


30 Ito & Brotheridge, op.cit.

31 Ito & Brotheridge (2003).


34 Ibid.


36 Green, op.cit.

37 Mir, Mir, & Mosca, op.cit.

38 Green, op.cit.

39 Duxbury, Dyke, & Lam, op.cit.


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