

Towards a Theory of Organizational Rehiring

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Organizations often look to hire the best and the brightest individuals, and in some cases, rehire them. Boomerang employees are an emerging source of talent gaining in popularity with organizations due to a myriad of positive outcomes including reduced costs, higher levels of job satisfaction, enhanced organizational commitment, less need for socialization, and reduced uncertainty. This paper combines the Unfolding Model of Voluntary Turnover and job embeddedness to argue that employees on departing paths (one and three) are better suited to become boomerangs as they were generally not dissatisfied with their jobs upon departure. Additionally, this paper suggests organizations focusing on maintaining or increasing links, emphasizing fit and decreasing sacrifice for returning employees, are better able to rehire former employees than organizations that do not.

As talent management practices evolve, organizations must compete to attract talent. One emerging source of talent, boomerang employees, is proving pivotal. Boomerangs are individuals that once worked for a particular organization, departed, and were later rehired by the same organization (Arnold, et al., 2020; Shipp, et al., 2014). Over the past 15 or so years, a growing body of literature has emerged demonstrating that boomerang employees can be a positive addition to a company's workforce. Boomerangs have been linked to reduced recruiting and training costs (Levoy, 2014), higher levels of job satisfaction and organizational commitment (Snyder, et al., 2020), less need for socialization (Keller, et al., 2021), and providing additional assistance to other colleagues (Groshjean, et al., 2024). However, even with the positive outcomes that are often associated with boomerangs, some organizations are still hesitant to rehire old employees (Apy & Ryckman, 2014). Organizations may fear that a previously departed employee would be likely to leave again. While this may be the case for at least some boomerangs (Arnold, et al., 2020), others may cherish the opportunity to return to old stomping grounds (Maier, et al., 2021). The issue for organizations is determining which ex-employees would be the most beneficial to rehire.

Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to provide guidance for organizations as to what types of former employees would be the most worthwhile to rehire. While empirical studies have greatly advanced work on boomerang employment, little theory (for a recent exception, see Dlouhy, et al., 2025) exists on the topic. To help generate this theory, I integrate boomerang employment with the unfolding model of voluntary turnover and job embeddedness to theorize which specific leavers to rehire. This article contributes to the literature by combining job embeddedness and the unfolding model of voluntary turnover to create propositions aimed at detailing how employees following certain departure paths are the most suitable candidates for rehire. Additionally, I detail how the key factors (links, fit and sacrifice) from the job embed-

dedness literature can be altered by organizations to make rehiring more attractive to desirable ex-employees. I argue organizations taking significant actions to maintain or increase the number of links, better emphasize fit, and decrease the sacrifice required to return are better positioned to attract ex-employees as compared to organizations that do not.

Literature Review: Overview of Turnover Paths, Job Embeddedness and Boomerangs

Turnover Paths

Why employees leave organizations has received much scholarly attention. Over the last few decades, scholars have explored how certain antecedents, such as shocks, image violations, job alternatives, and job dissatisfaction interact to influence employees' turnover decisions. These combinations of antecedents lead to turnover paths which compose the Unfolding Model of Voluntary Turnover (Lee & Mitchell, 1994). This model is grounded in image theory which suggests that new information is compared to an individual's self-image and when the new information is incompatible with self-image, turnover becomes more likely.

One key factor in the unfolding model is the presence of shocks. Shocks are events that cause workers to reconsider their current jobs (Lee et al., 1996). These shocks can be positive, such as an unexpected job offer, or negative, such as leaving work to care for a sick relative. Shocks can also lead to the enactment of scripts, which are preexisting plans of action when certain events occur. For example, an employee may be admitted to a full-time graduate school program automatically triggering departure as the ex-employee relocates to attend school. Turnover generally follows one of four distinct paths (Lee et al., 1999). Path one occurs when a shock triggers a memory probe for a matching script; if a relevant script exists and is deemed appropriate, it is enacted, leading to turnover with job satisfaction largely irrelevant. Examples include

following a spouse's relocation or the graduate school example previously mentioned. Path two occurs when a shock leads to image violations which produce an immediate decision to leave without searching for alternatives. The shock is typically negative, and quitting is driven by incompatibility rather than comparative evaluation of options. Path three occurs when a shock produces image violations and disaffection, prompting searches for alternatives, screening of options, and evaluating alternatives, often comparing utility to the status quo. Quitting occurs if an alternative is judged superior; otherwise, the employee stays. Path four occurs without a shock as organizational life slowly generates perceptions of misfit, leading to dissatisfaction. Quitting may occur with or without a search for alternatives.

Job Embeddedness

While some employees leave organizations, others stay. While early research focused on the affective components leading to employees staying at certain organizations, job embeddedness examines the on- and off-the job forces keeping people in their jobs (Mitchell et al., 2001). Generally, the more embedded an employee is, the less likely that turnover occurs. These forces vary but are generally related to links, fit, and sacrifice which occur at the organizational and community levels (Lee et al., 2004). Links are both formal and informal connections to people, organizations and the greater community. Fit is the perceived compatibility between employees and their environments. And sacrifice refers to the losses that one would incur upon leaving. Generally, the more links, the higher the perceived fit, and the more an employee would sacrifice by leaving, the more likely an employee remains in the organization (Lee et al., 2004).

While turnover paths explore why people leave and job embeddedness explores why people stay, an emergent line of research explores why people return. To better understand why organizations may desire to rehire an employee and why a former employee may want to return, I provide a brief overview of the antecedents of return.

Boomerang Antecedents from Organizational Perspective

Organizations open to rehiring boomerangs must consider which former employees are the most likely to return. One consideration to determine this is if the candidate voluntarily departed or was terminated. Candidates leaving on their own volition may be more likely to become boomerangs, particularly when they left for other positions due to strong performance (Shipp et al., 2014). Beyond performance, candidates departing relatively early in their previous tenure may be more likely to become boomerangs as early-career employees generally expand their knowledge, skills, and abilities more than later-career ex-employees, enabling them to better help the organization upon return (Shipp et al., 2014).

Additionally, the potential boomerang's that were dissatisfied with their jobs were unlikely to return. (Shipp et al., 2014). Candidates dissatisfied during their previous

tenures may still harbor dissatisfaction upon return unless major changes were made within the organization, the role, or within the candidate. Dissatisfied employees are more likely to turnover (Hom & Kinicki, 2001), so organizations should do their due diligence when considering ex-employees. For example, referencing any notes taken during an exit interview, looking for signs of dissatisfaction, could prove useful.

Boomerang Antecedents from Former Employee's Perspective

While an organization may want an ex-employee to return, the potential boomerang must also desire restarting the employment relationship. Research exploring why boomerangs want to return is limited, but a handful of studies laid the groundwork for exploration in this area. For example, one study of British Health Services employees found individuals desiring to return cited job security and promotion opportunities during the first return, and if they returned for a second time, they cited job security, flexible hours, and belief in the principles of British Health Services. However the authors caution interpretation of results for the second return due to small sample size (Loan-Clarke et al., 2010). Another study of 672 German interns found that interns expressed stronger desire to return when they possessed residual affective commitment for the company, expected the company to rehire them, and when they lacked job alternatives (Breitsohl & Ruhle, 2016). While interns may not be typical boomerangs, recent scholarship has considered them relevant to the boomerang literature (Dlouhy et al., 2025, p.17).

A boomerang's current job plays a role in the desire to return. As boomerangs demonstrate lower levels of commitment to current employers, intentions to return increase, partially due to discovering current employers failed to meet expectations as the grass wasn't always greener on the other side (Maier, et al., 2021). The prestige and reputation of the former employer influences return decisions (Magrizos, et al., 2022; Tian, et al., 2022). Organizations with good reputations attracted boomerangs due to a strong desire to reassociate with the company. In one qualitative study of 25 commercial kitchen employees in Greece, a common reason for return was a boomerang's desire to work for head chefs with a superb industrial reputation (Magrizos et al., 2022).

Social aspects of an organization present another reason for return. When former colleagues remained in an organization, a potential boomerang is more likely to return when still embedded within the former colleagues' friend group (Maier et al., 2021; Malinen et al., 2021). A study of 236 Finnish firefighters discovered that boomerang employees most often returned for the social factors related to an organization, including familiarity with team members, a positive work climate, and the frequency with which they kept in touch after departure (Malinen et al., 2021). A final attribute influencing a potential boomerang's intention to return is professional development. As organizations offer increased training and leadership development, ex-employees demonstrated a higher intention

to return, as evidenced by a qualitative study of 23 former employees across nine organizations in India (Sharma, 2018).

Building Theory: Merging Turnover Paths, Job Embeddedness and Boomerangs

Each of the previously discussed literatures contribute to scholarship but when meshed, uniquely contributes to human resource management, especially organizational rehiring. This section explores the intersection of these three areas of research and advances scholarship through the creation of propositions. The antecedents of turnover lead to specific turnover paths with certain paths being the most relevant to organizational returns.

Path one leavers depart in response to a shock that triggers a preexisting script. Often these ex-employees turnover due to life-course moves, such as spousal relocation, graduate school or caring for a sick relative. Former employees on path one may not harbor any dissatisfaction for the organization. Given this, organizations may have interest in rehiring path one leavers, which leads to my first proposition.

- P1. Organizations will, on average, view ex-employees who exited via path one as more desirable rehire candidates than those who exited via paths dominated by dissatisfaction or negative shocks (paths two and four), because path one exits do not imply rejection of the organization's values, goals, or practices.

Path two departees experience a negative shock that violates a worker's self-image. In these cases, the antecedents for turnover are quite severe as they cause employees to reevaluate their values, goals, and strategy. If the shock does not align with this, employees turnover without searching for alternatives. In these cases, the negative shock is often due to something within the organization. Given this, path two leavers do not appear to be candidates to return, which leads to my second proposition.

- P2. Organizations will view ex-employees who exited via path two as less desirable rehire candidates than those who exited via paths one or three, because path two exits are strongly associated with image violations and negative shocks involving the organization.

Path three leavers experience shock which leads to evaluating other job opportunities. There may be an image violation, but it is not severe enough to push an employee to quit. Often, path three leavers are pulled from their current jobs by other opportunities. These former employees may be highly sought after professionals that bring value to wherever they work. Given this, organizations may desire to rehire these individuals as they were not driven away by dissatisfaction but instead pulled away by alternatives, which leads to my third proposition.

- P3. Organizations will view ex-employees who exited via path three as attractive rehire candidates, especially when they departed for higher-value roles (e.g., promotions, elite institutions), because path three exits convey strong external demand without necessarily indicating deep dissatisfaction with the focal organization.

Path four departees do not experience a shock but suffer from the buildup of gradual dissatisfaction. They may or may not search for job alternatives prior to leaving. These former employees are unhappy with their jobs, the organization, or their overall work environment which triggers leaving. Employees on this path are generally not the most suitable to be rehired, which leads to my fourth proposition.

- P4. Organizations will, on average, view ex-employees who exited via path four as less desirable rehires than those who exited via paths one or three, because path four exits are driven by sustained job dissatisfaction and perceived misfit, which may persist upon rehire.

Work on job embeddedness argues that organizations can influence embeddedness by altering links, enhancing fit, and increasing valued sacrifices which propels employees to stay in their jobs (Lee et al., 2004). However, some employees still turnover. I argue that while an ex-employee no longer works for a particular company that organizations can still use the principles (links, fit and sacrifice) from the embeddedness literature to influence desired former employees from paths one and three to return. One step organizations can take is focusing on the maintenance or re-establishment of preexisting links. To do this, organizations could create social media sites for networking, hire former employees as independent contractors, and establish alumni committees to keep former employees in the loop. Beyond this, organizations could encourage current employees to reconnect with alumni as reconnecting with people from the past can provide positive outcomes including access to novel information, financial capital, and social support (Levin et al., 2011; Steier & Greenwood, 1999; Yang et al., 2021). Another step organizations can take is better emphasizing how former employees still fit with the company and the greater community. For example, companies can establish a newsletter detailing the latest information about the company and distribute it to desired boomerangs. Doing this helps potential boomerangs better understand how their knowledge, skills, and abilities fit into the company's strategy.

Limiting sacrifices that boomerang employees would occur can also make returning more desirable. Human resources can implement practices such as spousal hiring to ease concerns over a partner's ability to find work. Organizations may consider offering relocation assistance if former employees had to move for their current jobs and they could potentially offer numerous benefit packages to help former employees move current benefits, like 401-K plans, to their previous employer. Given an organization's potential to influence links, fit, and sacrifice, I suggest former employers can take steps to make returning to their organizations easier for former employees, which leads to proposition five.

- P5. Organizations focusing on maintaining or re-establishing existing links, emphasizing fit and decreasing sacrifice are better positioned to attract boomerang employees than organizations that do not.

Discussion

Boomerangs are key to talent management practices. However, not all former employees are strong candidates for rehire. This paper argues that the turnover path an ex-employee was on at departure influences which former employees would be good choices to rehire. I argue that employees departing on paths one and three from the Unfolding Model of Voluntary Turnover are strong candidates as their departures were not due to dissatisfaction. Additionally, I argue that organizations capable of maintaining or increasing links with former employees, those emphasizing fit, and those capable of decreasing the sacrifice former employees would make to return have an advantage on organizations not utilizing these practices.

Future Research Directions

Relationships with coworkers are critical for organizational life (Burt, 2002). These relationships are important throughout an employee's tenure in a company but are also important during an employee's absence. The little research in this area originally focused on the benefits that remaining colleagues receive from staying in touch (Kleinbaum, 2012) overlooking what happens for the departed. However, recent work has shown departed employees who remain in touch with ex-colleagues are more successful at socially integrating into new workplaces (Walsh et al., 2018).

What remains unanswered is how prior relationships with ex-colleagues influence the social reintegration process for boomerangs. The expectation would be that maintained ties positively influences reintegration, but many of our relationships are not maintained and instead fall dormant as individuals lose contact (Levin et al., 2011). Research would benefit from investigating the differences in the social reintegration process for ties that were maintained versus those falling dormant.

Boomerang research has focused on either the boomerang or the overall organization, but boomerangs generally do not work in isolation, but instead as part of a group or a team. However, scholarship has mostly overlooked how a returning employee impacts coworkers. Research on employees with illnesses or disabilities returning to an organization after an extended medical-related absence shows employees may be welcomed back with open arms, particularly if the prior relationship was positive but could negatively influence workplace attitudes and withdraw behaviors (Dunstan & MacEachen, 2013).

Negative reactions could emerge from colleagues as research has shown that boomerangs are promoted faster and receive higher compensation than coworkers without departures (Arnold et al., 2020; Snyder et al., 2020). Coworkers may consider this unfair which can impact the behavior of many people (Konow, 2003) leading to potential departures and envy from colleagues.

Another potential area for future research is on the psychological aspects of boomerangs. Research (for a recent exception, see Dlouhy et al., 2025) has rarely examined if particular psychological traits make someone more likely

to return. For example, research has shown that some individuals are more prone to nostalgia than others (Batcho, et al., 2008). These individuals are often enamored with the past and are dismayed with their current state (Seehusen et al., 2013). Nostalgia-prone individuals could be more likely to become boomerangs when they wish to relive the past. Nostalgia can be beneficial to organizations through increased work meaningfulness and decreased turnover (van Dijke & Leunissen, 2023).

Conclusion

Boomerang employees are beneficial for organizations; however, theory is limited on the rehiring process. This paper meshes work on voluntary turnover and job embeddedness to argue that former employees departing on paths one and three are better suited to be candidates for rehire. To help attract these candidates, organizational practices can focus on maintaining links, emphasizing fit, and decreasing sacrifice to better position themselves to recruit ex-employees back into the fold.

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