

# THE HIDDEN STRUCTURE OF VOLUNTARY TURNOVER THEORY EVOLUTION: A SPAR-4-SLR META-THEORETICAL ANALYSIS

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## Abstract

This study aims to construct an integrated structural synthesis of the evolution of voluntary turnover (VTO) theory, mapping both its chronological development and the conceptual genealogy linking its theories, together with the variables derived from each theory in the most recent phase. The method is a systematic literature review applying the SPAR-4-SLR protocol combined with the TCM-ADO framework, drawing on high-quality, peer-reviewed articles indexed in Scopus and examined through content analysis. The results show that VTO theory has evolved along several interconnected pathways, from a foundational early-mobility era through attitudinal, adaptation, and dynamic-cognitive eras to a recent alternative-pathway era; theories develop both independently and through cross-era influence, and their derived variables relate to turnover in increasing, decreasing, and curvilinear ways. The synthesis offers conceptual clarity for researchers and a genealogical map to guide retention strategy and future VTO research.

**Keywords:** Employee Retention; SPAR-4-SLR; TCM-ADO Framework; Theory Evolution and Genealogy; Voluntary Turnover

## INTRODUCTION

Literature reviews searching for the antecedents and impacts of voluntary turnover (VTO) have a long history. An early meta-synthesis (Muchinsky & Morrow, 1980) modelled the antecedents and impacts of VTO and the magnitude of each relationship. The intervening (mediator) variable was first made explicit in a causal model of VTO (Price, 2001), and the mediating mechanisms were later elaborated through the eight motivational forces (Maertz Jr. & Griffeth, 2004). A subsequent review introduced more detailed proximal and distal variable models (Lo, 2015). While these works usefully compile turnover variables for best practice, they say little about the origins of the theories that produced those variables, leaving the question of why and how VTO occurs conceptually underexplained. The evolution of VTO theory is described sequentially in *On the Next Decade of Research in Voluntary Employee Turnover* (T. W. Lee et al., 2017), which summarises VTO research across five perspectives (theory, time, control, context, and future agendas), and was later complemented by a PRISMA-based systematic review of empirical and methodological trends (Bolt et al., 2022). Yet neither incorporates the practical variables (antecedents, mediators, moderators, impacts) derived from the theories, limiting their applicability.

These studies reveal a gap: few reviews synthesise VTO research in an integrated way. A coherent, comprehensive VTO review must satisfy three requirements simultaneously: it must capture theory evolution, preserve chronology, and include the variables (and relationships) derived from each theory. Theory grounds the logic of VTO causes and processes, chronology anchors paradigm shifts in temporal sequence, and the derived variables support implementation as the axiological dimension of research. This systematic literature review (SLR) fills that gap through an integrated synthesis of theory evolution, chronology, and derived variables, translated into three research questions: (RQ1) What is the updated pattern of VTO theory evolution over time? (RQ2) What is the chronology of the genealogy of theories on the most recent evolutionary map of VTO? (RQ3) What variables are derived from VTO theory in the most recent evolutionary era?

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Theoretical Background

Voluntary turnover can be defined in two ways. In individual terms, it is a worker's own-initiative decision to leave the organization (H. Lee & Sturm, 2017; Morrow et al., 1999; Reiche, 2009). In collective terms, it is the

turnover rate, namely the aggregate of voluntary departures within a unit over a period relative to workforce size (Hausknecht, 2017). Viewing VTO through the evolution of its theory exposes the conceptual roots of the phenomenon, clarifies the paradigm shift from economic-rational toward psychological-social explanations, and helps identify relevant derived variables for practice. Five marker theories punctuate this evolution and define its five eras. The Desirability & Ease of Movement Theory (March & Simon, 1958) treats turnover as a function of the desire to leave and the ease of moving, marking the foundational/early-mobility era. The Two-Factor Motivator–Hygiene Theory (Herzberg, 1959) separates intrinsic motivators from extrinsic hygiene factors, marking the attitudinal & cognitive-process era. The Three-Component Model of Organizational Commitment (Meyer & Allen, 1991) reframes commitment as affective, continuance, and normative states experienced simultaneously, marking the adaptation era. Cybernetic Theory (Wiener, 1948) explains adaptation through feedback loops, marking the advanced cognitive/dynamic era. The Unfolding Model of Turnover (T. W. Lee & Mitchell, 1994) shows that shocks, not only dissatisfaction, trigger several distinct turnover pathways, marking the alternative pathway & modern era. These five anchor the history of turnover research; however, no prior synthesis has combined this evolution with the derived variables of each theory, especially for the most recent era, which motivates the present review.

## METHOD

Amid the rapid growth of scientific output, an effective yet efficient review approach is needed (Arora et al., 2025). PRISMA and PRISMA-P offer orderly, transparent procedures but provide little rationale for stage-by-stage decisions; SPAR-4-SLR was proposed to address this (Paul et al., 2021). This study therefore adopts SPAR-4-SLR as a domain-based review structured by the Theories–Contexts–Methods (TCM) (Paul et al., 2017) and Antecedents–Decisions–Outcomes (ADO) (Paul & Benito, 2018) frameworks, together TCM-ADO. The review proceeds in three stages: extraction, origin-tracing, and classification. The extraction stage draws all TCM-ADO attributes (theories and variables) from each study using SPAR-4-SLR, through three phases (Assembling, Arranging, and Assessing) comprising six sub-stages (Figure 1). The origin-tracing stage establishes the lineage of each extracted theory: using backward citation tracing (snowballing) from the in-text references of the corpus articles, each theory's originating publication was located to fix its date of emergence and reconstruct the genealogy among theories. Because some originating works (for example, foundational monographs) fall outside the journal-only inclusion criteria, this stage deliberately reaches beyond the corpus to the primary sources cited within it; genealogical claims are restricted to relationships among the 62 theories surfaced by the search. The classification stage assigns theories to five eras by chronology and characteristic features, then examines the derived variables of the fifth era using the extraction results. Era assignment was performed by the authors through content analysis, comparing each theory with the marker theory of each pathway while preserving chronology; because this involves interpretive judgement, it is treated transparently as an author-constructed proposal (see Conclusion).

### Assembling

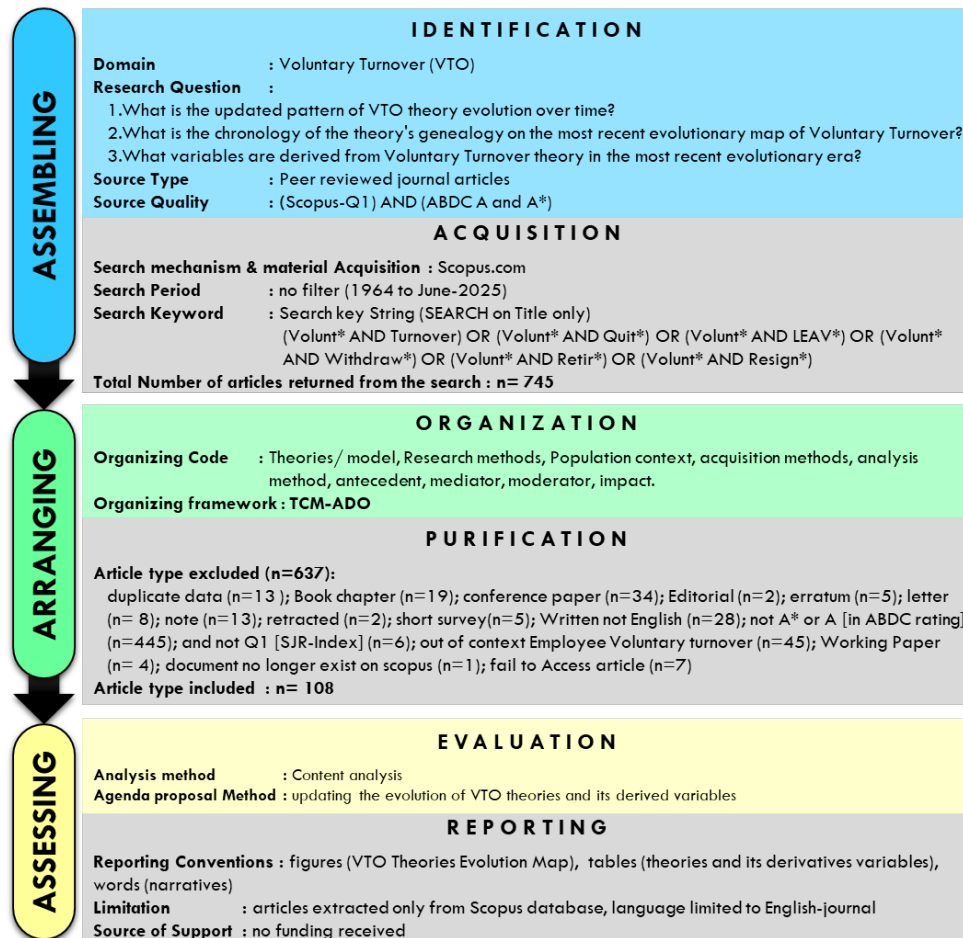
The domain was VTO, addressed through three RQs. Documents were peer-reviewed journal articles indexed in Scopus with a Q1 ranking and an ABDC rating of A or A. The search engine was Scopus (date filter unrestricted, 1964–2025), conducted on titles only with the string `(Volunt AND Turnover) OR (Volunt AND Quit) OR (Volunt AND Leav) OR (Volunt AND Withdraw) OR (Volunt AND Retir) OR (Volunt AND Resign)`, yielding 745 records (early June 2025).

### Arranging

Items were coded as theory/model, research method, population context, acquisition method, analysis method, antecedent, mediator, moderator, and impact, under the TCM-ADO framework. In purification, 637 records were excluded by document type, language, journal quality (non-A\*/A on ABDC; non-Q1 on SJR), topical relevance, and accessibility (full counts given in Figure 1), leaving 108 articles for inclusion.

### Assessing

The analytical method was content analysis; results are reported through figures, tables, and narrative. Table 1 sets out the rationale for each SPAR-4-SLR step, and Table 2 lists the TCM-ADO extraction items and their objectives.



**Figure 1** Review procedure following the SPAR-4-SLR protocol (Paul et al., 2021)

*Source: Adapted from Paul et al. (2021)*

**Table 1** Integration and rationale of the SPAR-4-SLR procedure

Phase / sub-stage	Criteria and actions	Rationale
Assembling: Identification	Domain: Voluntary Turnover (VTO)	A domain-based review concentrating on the VTO area; involuntary turnover and other areas are excluded.
	Research questions: (RQ1) updated pattern of VTO theory evolution; (RQ2) chronology of theory genealogy on the most recent map; (RQ3) variables derived in the most recent era	To direct content analysis, describe the history of VTO research, and develop a future research agenda.
	Source type: peer-reviewed journal articles	To ensure that processed articles are credible and content-validated.
	Source quality: Scopus Q1 AND ABDC A/A*	Scopus excludes predatory journals; ABDC A* = top-tier world-class journals and A = high-quality international journals, indicating high academic value.
Assembling: Acquisition	Search engine: Scopus.com	A single, large, high-quality database yielding more uniform attributes and integrated data.
	Search period: 1964 to June 2025 (unfiltered)	The date filter was left open; the oldest VTO article is from 1964 and the most recent from 2025.

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Phase / sub-stage	Criteria and actions	Rationale
	Search keywords (title only): (Volunt* AND Turnover) OR (Volunt* AND Quit*) OR (Volunt* AND Leav*) OR (Volunt* AND Withdraw*) OR (Volunt* AND Retir*) OR (Volunt* AND Resign*)	String variations to obtain articles relevant to the VTO domain.
Arranging: Organization	Coding: theory/model, research method, population context, acquisition method, analysis method, antecedent, mediator, moderator, impact	Standard conventions specifying the information to be extracted from each reviewed article.
	Organising framework: TCM-ADO	The chosen review framework, also usable as a reference for others conducting VTO research by the same method.
Arranging: Purification	Articles excluded (n = 637)	Quality assurance: removing duplicates, book chapters, conference papers, editorials, errata, letters, notes, retracted articles, short surveys, non-English articles, non-A*/A (ABDC), non-Q1 (SJR), off-topic items, working papers, items absent from Scopus, and inaccessible items.
	Articles included (n = 108)	The final corpus meeting all inclusion criteria.
Assessing: Evaluation	Analysis method: content analysis	Structures the grouping of information by type and chronology, deepening insight into VTO from multiple perspectives.
	Agenda-proposal method: updating VTO theory evolution and derived variables	Identified gaps in theory, variables, and methodology guide future research directions.
Assessing: Reporting	Reporting conventions: figures (VTO Theory Evolution Map), tables (theories and derived variables), narrative	Conventions that help readers digest the article and that disclose process/result limitations and funding status.
	Limitation: single database (Scopus), title-only search, English-language journals	(as above)
	Source of support: no funding received	(as above)

Source: Adapted from Paul et al. (2021)

**Table 2** TCM-ADO framework: item extraction codes and their output products

TCM-ADO item	Extracted item	Description	Purpose
Theories	Theory/model	The set of theories underlying VTO research (the basis for antecedents, mediators, moderators, and impacts)	To investigate the theories explaining the causes, processes, or impacts of VTO
Context	Population context	The research population, that is, segments of social units or institutions related to VTO variables	To identify which population segments are dominant and which are rare or unstudied

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TCM-ADO item	Extracted item	Description	Purpose
Methods	Data-acquisition method	Methods used to measure or collect VTO research data	To investigate which data-collection methods have been applied
Methods	Data-analysis method	Methods used to analyse VTO research data	To identify the most and least frequently applied analysis methods
Antecedent	Predictor variables	Predictors tested in VTO research	To collect antecedent-VTO relationship types and identify rarely tested categories
Decision	Moderators; mediators	Moderators and mediators tested in VTO studies	To collect mediator and moderator relationship types
Outcomes	Impact / dependent variable	Impact variables tested in VTO research	To compile VTO relationships to their impacts

*Source: Adapted from Paul et al. (2017, 2018)*

**RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

First-stage extraction recovered 18 theories established in prior synthesis (Hom et al., 2017), labelled the Previous Reference Theories (Table 3), plus 44 further theories bearing on VTO, labelled the New Finding Theories (Table 4), for a total of 62 theories. The discussion follows the three research questions.

**Table 3** Previous Reference Theories of VTO extracted using SPAR-4-SLR

Theory/Model	Theory initiator	Earliest publication	Reference
Cybernetics	N. Wiener (1948); R. P. Steel (2002)	1948	(Wiener, 1948)
Expectancy-Value Model	W. Edwards (1954); H. Peak; V. H. Vroom (1964)	1954	(Edwards, 1954)
Desirability & Ease of Movement	J. G. March & H. A. Simon	1958	(March & Simon, 1958)
Motivator-Hygiene Theory	F. Herzberg	1959	(Herzberg, 1959)
Achievement Motivation	D. C. McClelland	1961	(McClelland, 1961)
Equity Theory	J. S. Adams	1963	(Adams, 1963)
Job Choice Theory	P. O. Soelberg	1967	(Soelberg, 1967)
Met Expectations Hypothesis	L. W. Porter & R. M. Steers	1972	(Porter & Steers, 1972)
Hobo Syndrome	E. E. Ghiselli	1974	(Ghiselli, 1974)
Theory of Reasoned Action (TRA)	M. Fishbein & I. Ajzen	1975	(Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975)
Intermediate Linkages Model	W. H. Mobley	1977	(Mobley, 1977)
Price/Price-Mueller Model	J. L. Price (1977); C. W. Mueller (1981)	1977	(Price, 1977)
Steers & Mowday Model	R. M. Steers; R. T. Mowday	1982	(Mowday et al., 1982)
Work Adaptation Theory	R. V. Dawis & L. H. Lofquist	1984	(Dawis & Lofquist, 1984)
Three-Component Model of Organizational Commitment	J. P. Meyer & N. J. Allen	1991	(Meyer & Allen, 1991)
Unfolding Model of Voluntary Turnover	T. W. Lee & T. R. Mitchell	1994	(T. W. Lee & Mitchell, 1994)
Employee-Organization	Tsui, Pearce, Porter & Tripoli	1997	(Tsui & Porter, 1997)

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<b>Theory/Model</b>	<b>Theory initiator</b>	<b>Earliest publication</b>	<b>Reference</b>
Relationship (EOR)			
Job Embeddedness Theory	Mitchell, Holtom, Lee, Sablinski & Erez	2001	(Mitchell et al., 2001)

*Source: Authors' extraction from Scopus (2025)*

**Table 4** New Finding Theories of VTO extracted using SPAR-4-SLR

<b>Theory/Model</b>	<b>Theory initiator</b>	<b>Earliest publication</b>	<b>Reference</b>
Theory of Organizational Equilibrium	H. A. Simon	1947	(Simon, 1947)
Field Theory / Gestalt Psychology	K. Lewin	1951	(Lewin, 1951)
Social Comparison Theory	L. Festinger	1954	(Festinger, 1954)
Side-Bet Theory of Commitment	H. Becker	1960	(H. Becker, 1960)
Social Exchange Theory	P. M. Blau	1964	(Blau, 1964)
Human Capital Theory	G. S. Becker	1964	(G. S. Becker, 1964)
Liability of Newness	A. L. Stinchcombe	1965	(Stinchcombe, 1965)
Organizational Climate Theory	D. Katz & R. L. Kahn	1966	(Katz & Kahn, 1966)
Role Theory	D. Katz & R. L. Kahn	1966	(Katz & Kahn, 1966)
Identity Theory	S. Stryker	1968	(Stryker, 1968)
Behavioral Inhibition System (BIS)	J. A. Gray	1970	(Gray, 1970)
Job–Worker Matching Theory	J. J. McCall	1970	(McCall, 1970)
Theory of Compensation	E. E. Lawler	1971	(Lawler, 1971)
Signaling Theory	M. Spence	1973	(Spence, 1973)
Realistic Job Preview (RJP)	J. P. Wanous	1973	(Wanous, 1973)
Procedural Justice	J. Thibaut & L. Walker	1975	(Thibaut & Walker, 1975)
Job Characteristics Model (JCM)	J. R. Hackman & G. R. Oldham	1976	(Hackman & Oldham, 1976)
Self-confidence / Self-efficacy	A. Bandura	1977	(Bandura, 1977)
Life Stage Theory	D. Levinson	1978	(Levinson, 1978)
Social Identity Theory	H. Tajfel & J. Turner	1979	(Tajfel & Turner, 1979)
Self-Determination Theory	E. L. Deci & R. M. Ryan	1985	(Deci & Ryan, 1985)
Perceived Organizational Support (POS) Theory	R. Eisenberger	1986	(Eisenberger, 1986)
Cost-Benefit Theory	J. Drèze & N. Stern	1987	(Dreze & Nicholas, 1987)
ASA Framework	B. Schneider	1987	(Schneider, 1987)
Psychological Contract (PC) Theory	D. M. Rousseau	1989	(Rousseau, 1989)
Conservation of Resources (COR) Theory	S. E. Hobfoll	1989	(Hobfoll, 1989)
Image Theory	L. R. Beach	1990	(Beach, 1990)
Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB)	I. Ajzen	1991	(Ajzen, 1991)

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Theory/Model	Theory initiator	Earliest publication	Reference
Resource-Based Theory	J. Barney	1991	(Barney, 1991)
Complex Adaptive System (CAS) Theory	J. H. Holland	1992	(Holland, 1992)
Five-Factor Model	P. T. Costa & R. R. McCrae	1992	(Costa & McCrae, 1992)
Commitment Propensity Theory	Lee, Ashford, Walsh & Mowday	1992	(T. W. Lee et al., 1992)
HR Practices	J. Pfeffer	1994	(Pfeffer, 1994)
Sensemaking Theory	K. E. Weick	1995	(Weick, 1995)
Person–Organization Fit Theory	A. L. Kristof	1996	(Kristof, 1996)
Operational Disruption Theory	K. B. Hendricks & V. R. Singhal	1997	(Hendrick & Singhal, 1997)
Belief Update Theory	R. Elio & F. J. Pelletier	1997	(Elio & Pelletier, 1997)
Mishra & Spreitzer Conceptual Model	A. K. Mishra & G. M. Spreitzer	1998	(Mishra & Spreitzer, 1998)
Retesting Behavior	Hausknecht, Trevor & Farr	2002	(Hausknecht et al., 2002)
Movement Capital Theory	B. Holtom & T. Lee	2002	(Holtom et al., 2002)
Turnover Contagion Theory	Felps, Mitchell, Hekman, Lee, Holtom & Harman	2009	(Felps et al., 2009)
Proximal Withdrawal States Theory (PWST)	Hom, Lee, Mitchell & Griffeth	2012	(Hom et al., 2012)
Context-Emergent Turnover (CET) Theory	A. J. Nyberg & R. E. Ployhart	2013	(Nyberg & Ployhart, 2013)
Decisiveness Theory	B. D. Bernheim & A. Bodoh-Creed	2020	(Bernheim & Bodoh-Creed, 2020)

*Source: Authors' extraction from Scopus (2025)*

**The updated pattern of VTO theory evolution**

The 62 theories were sorted by date of original publication and grouped into five evolutionary-era pathways through the authors' content-analytic comparison with each pathway's marker theory, while preserving chronology. The result is the VTO Theory Evolution Map (Figure 2), in which Previous Reference Theories appear in blue and New Finding Theories in green, and identified lines of influence are drawn as arrows (some theories have no identified lineage). The full catalogue of theories, initiators, and dates is given in Tables 3–4; this section synthesises the logic of each era and its pivotal theories.

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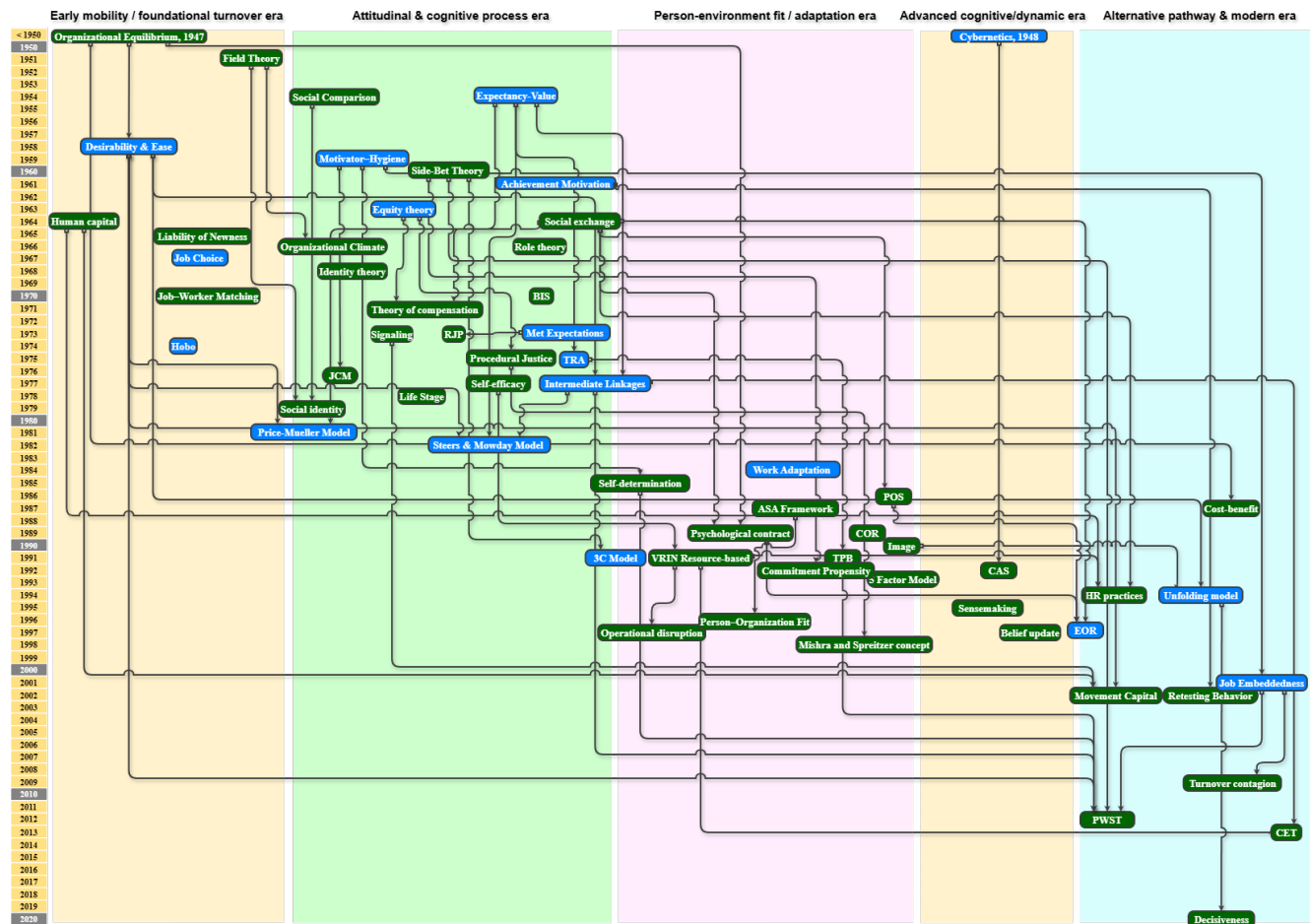


Figure 2 The VTO Theory Evolution Map

Source: Authors (2025)

## Foundational Turnover / Early Mobility Era

This era establishes why people stay or leave. Its marker, Desirability & Ease of Movement (March & Simon, 1958), holds that turnover occurs under high dissatisfaction (desirability) and abundant alternatives (ease); it extends the Theory of Organizational Equilibrium (Simon, 1947) by adding a labour-market dimension. Field Theory (Lewin, 1951) frames movement as the product of individual-field interaction and anticipates Organizational Climate Theory. Human Capital Theory (G. S. Becker, 1964) treats skills as investments, where general skills ease departure and firm-specific skills lock employees in, later seeding Movement Capital and HR Practices. Liability of Newness (Stinchcombe, 1965) attributes turnover to the "double burden" of new firms; Job Choice Theory (Soelberg, 1967) and Job-Worker Matching (McCall, 1970) cast job search as a partly non-rational cost-benefit match; and the Hobo Syndrome (Ghiselli, 1974) identifies psychologically driven serial movers whom pay cannot retain.

## Attitudinal & Cognitive Process Era

Turnover here is dominated by attitudes and deliberation. The marker, Motivator-Hygiene Theory (Herzberg, 1959), separates intrinsic motivators (whose absence is merely neutral) from extrinsic hygiene factors (whose absence triggers dissatisfaction and exit). Intrinsic motivation was elaborated by the Job Characteristics Model (Hackman & Oldham, 1976); compensation logic by the Theory of Compensation (Lawler, 1971), Equity Theory (Adams, 1963), and Procedural Justice (Thibaut & Walker, 1975); and the effort-reward chain by the Expectancy-Value Model (Edwards, 1954), the Theory of Reasoned Action (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975), and Self-Efficacy Theory (Bandura, 1977), which counters the Behavioral Inhibition System (Gray, 1970). Social-role accounts comprise Identity Theory (Stryker, 1968), Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), which is rooted in Social Comparison (Festinger, 1954), and Role Theory (Katz & Kahn, 1966), contrasting inside-out and outside-in role logics. Mitigation appears via the Realistic Job Preview (Wanous, 1973) and the Met Expectations Hypothesis (Porter & Steers, 1972), later embedded in the Steers & Mowday model (Mowday et al., 1982) and the earlier Intermediate Linkages Model (Mobley, 1977). The integrated Price-Mueller model (Price & Mueller, 1981) rests

on Social Exchange Theory (Blau, 1964). Five further theories round out the era: Side-Bet Commitment (H. Becker, 1960), Achievement Motivation (McClelland, 1961), Organizational Climate (Katz & Kahn, 1966), Signaling (Spence, 1973), and Life Stage (Levinson, 1978).

## Adaptation Era

Theories here concern the fit and adaptation of individuals to organizations. The marker, the Three-Component Model (Meyer & Allen, 1991), is complemented by Commitment Propensity Theory (T. W. Lee et al., 1992) and the Five-Factor Model (Costa & McCrae, 1992), which locate commitment partly in pre-entry disposition. Person–Organization Fit (Kristof, 1996) integrates Work Adaptation Theory (Dawis & Lofquist, 1984), the ASA Framework (Schneider, 1987), and Image Theory (Beach, 1990). Reciprocity is captured by Perceived Organizational Support (Eisenberger, 1986) and Psychological Contract Theory (Rousseau, 1989); downsizing trauma by the Mishra–Spreitzer model (Mishra & Spreitzer, 1998) and Conservation of Resources (Hobfoll, 1989); and post-turnover disruption by Operational Disruption Theory (Hendrick & Singhal, 1997), which extends the Resource-Based View (Barney, 1991). Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985) and the Theory of Planned Behavior (Ajzen, 1991) complete the era.

## Advanced Cognitive/Dynamic Era

This era models dynamic adaptation. The marker, Cybernetics (Wiener, 1948), is refined by Complex Adaptive System theory (Holland, 1992), which adds self-organization, adaptation, and non-linearity, implying that small triggers can produce unexpected mass turnover and that firms must continuously read adaptive dynamics. Sensemaking Theory (Weick, 1995) explains how employees construct meaning under ambiguity, and Belief Update Theory (Elio & Pelletier, 1997) describes the minimal-change revision of beliefs when sensemaking turns negative.

## Alternative Pathway & Modern Era

The most recent era is defined by multiple sub-pathways to turnover. Its marker, the Unfolding Model (T. W. Lee & Mitchell, 1994), shows that a shock, not only dissatisfaction, triggers decision-making along four pathways (planned exit on a shock; instant exit on a dire event; exit to an external offer; and the conventional dissatisfaction path). Job Embeddedness (Mitchell et al., 2001) explains why people stay despite shocks, through links, fit, and sacrifice; the same network logic, reversed, yields Turnover Contagion Theory (Felps et al., 2009). Proximal Withdrawal States Theory (Hom et al., 2012) classifies employees into enthusiastic/reluctant stayers and leavers via preference and control, with high-control enthusiastic leavers explained by Movement Capital (Holtom et al., 2002) and Decisiveness Theory (Bernheim & Bodoh-Creed, 2020). Five further fifth-era theories complete the era: Cost-Benefit (Dreze & Nicholas, 1987), HR Practices (Pfeffer, 1994), the Employee–Organization Relationship (Tsui & Porter, 1997), Retesting Behavior (Hausknecht et al., 2002), and Context-Emergent Turnover (Nyberg & Ployhart, 2013). These frame turnover, respectively, as an economic calculation, a retention investment, a reciprocal relationship, a signal of commitment, and an erosion of collective competitive advantage.

## The genealogy of VTO theory in the most recent era

Knowledge of theoretical genealogy lets researchers situate concepts historically and avoid their ahistorical, taken-for-granted use (Bastalich, 2009; D'Cruz, 2025), recognising that knowledge is produced through power relations rather than neutral (Saar, 2008; Williams, 2024). Of the 62 theories, 11 belong to the fifth pathway; their genealogies, restricted to relationships among the 62 SPAR-4-SLR theories, are summarised below (and drawn as arrows in Figure 2). Cost-Benefit Theory descends solely from the Theory of Organizational Equilibrium (Simon, 1947): staying or leaving is a rational comparison of inducements and contributions. HR Practices sits at the intersection of Human Capital Theory (G. S. Becker, 1964), Social Exchange Theory (Blau, 1964), and the Resource-Based View (Barney, 1991), legitimising HR investment as a hard-to-imitate work system. The Unfolding Model arises from a critique of Desirability & Ease of Movement (March & Simon, 1958), introducing the concept of shocks so that even satisfied employees may quit, and borrows the value, trajectory, and strategic images of Image Theory (Beach, 1990) to cast exit as often intuitive rather than calculated. The Employee–Organization Relationship (EOR) blends Social Exchange Theory (Blau, 1964) and its offshoot Perceived Organizational Support (Eisenberger, 1986) with the Psychological Contract (Rousseau, 1989), shifting focus from legal to perceived obligations. Job Embeddedness repurposes the hygiene-factor logic of Motivator–Hygiene Theory (Herzberg, 1959), in which benefits, location, and relationships become the "glue" of its links and sacrifice

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dimensions. Movement Capital combines Ease of Movement (March & Simon, 1958), Human Capital (G. S. Becker, 1964), and Signaling Theory (Spence, 1973): mobility depends on personal assets that are visible and resaleable in the external market. Retesting Behavior draws on Achievement Motivation (McClelland, 1961), reading reapplication as persistence and goal orientation. Turnover Contagion inverts Job Embeddedness (Mitchell et al., 2001): because employees share a network of links, a departing "node" weakens others' bonds and spreads the desire to leave. PWST integrates four theories with retention support from Job Embeddedness and the Side-Bet Theory (H. Becker, 1960). The four are Desirability & Ease of Movement (March & Simon, 1958), Intermediate Linkages (Mobley, 1977), Planned Behavior (Ajzen, 1991), and Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985); the last supplies the autonomous-versus-controlled basis of the "enthusiastic" versus "reluctant" distinction. Context-Emergent Turnover joins the Intermediate Linkages Model (Mobley, 1977) to the Resource-Based View (Barney, 1991), treating collective turnover as context-dependent erosion of competitive advantage. Finally, Decisiveness Theory extends the Unfolding Model (T. W. Lee & Mitchell, 1994) by adding the trait that determines how quickly an individual converts a shock response into actual withdrawal.

## VTO variables in the most recent era

Theory is the conceptual bridge between variables: without correct derivation, hypotheses cannot be properly constructed or measured (Andrade, 2021), and theories cannot be tested effectively (Alwiyah et al., 2018). Of the 11 fifth-era theories, two (EOR and Context-Emergent Turnover) had no derived variables under the protocol; the remaining nine and their variables, designs, contexts, and analysis methods appear in Table 5. The discussion is organised by the direction of each variable's relationship to turnover.

**Table 5** Variables derived from VTO theory in the fifth era

Birth year	Theory	Research design	Population context	Analysis method	Variable type	Research variable	Relation
1987	Cost-Benefit Theory	Longitudinal survey	Government institutions	Feasible Generalized Least Squares (FGLS)	Impact	Workforce performance	Curvilinear
1994	HR Practices	Cross-sectional survey	Trucking industries	Logistic regression	Antecedent	Average pay, benefits, training	Reduce
1994	Unfolding Model of Voluntary Turnover	Case study; cross-sectional survey; longitudinal survey; meta-analysis; grounded theory; literature review; meta-synthesis	Consultants; food & product distributors; former workers; healthcare workers; property agencies; restaurant & service; IT workforce	Logistic regression; Cox proportional hazards; time-dependent Cox regression	Antecedent	Decisiveness	Reduce
1994	Unfolding Model of Voluntary Turnover	(as above)	(as above)	(as above)	Antecedent	Job performance	Curvilinear
1994	Unfolding Model of Voluntary Turnover	(as above)	(as above)	(as above)	Antecedent	Job satisfaction	Reduce
1997	Employee–Organization	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.

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Birth year	Theory	Research design	Population context	Analysis method	Variable type	Research variable	Relation
	Relationship (EOR)						
2001	Job Embeddedness Theory	Cross-sectional survey; longitudinal survey; literature review; meta-synthesis	Food & product distributors; military; property agencies; IT workforce	Directional Z-statistics; logistic regression; Cox proportional hazards; linear hierarchical regression	Antecedent	Past thoughts of leaving	Increase
2001	Job Embeddedness Theory	(as above)	(as above)	(as above)	Antecedent	Desire for the job; self-confidence	Reduce
2001	Job Embeddedness Theory	(as above)	(as above)	(as above)	Antecedent	On-the-job embeddedness	Reduce
2002	Movement Capital Theory	Cross-sectional survey	Professional association	Multiple Ordinary Least Squares (MOLS)	Moderator	Pay level	Reduce
2002	Retesting Behavior	Cross-sectional survey	Public service	Logistic regression	Antecedent	Applicant status	Reduce
2009	Turnover Contagion Theory	Meta-analysis	n.a.	n.a.	Moderator	Turnover base rate	Increase
2012	Proximal Withdrawal States Theory (PWST)	Cross-sectional survey	n.a.	Structural Equation Modelling (SEM)	Antecedent	Job insecurity	Increase
2012	Proximal Withdrawal States Theory (PWST)	Cross-sectional survey	n.a.	Structural Equation Modelling (SEM)	Mediator	Active job search	Increase
2013	Context-Emergent Turnover (CET) Theory	Literature review	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.
2020	Decisiveness Theory	Cross-sectional survey	Food & product distributors	Logistic regression	Antecedent	Employee referral	Reduce

*Source: Authors' analysis (2025)*

**Variables that increase turnover**

Job Embeddedness yields past thoughts of leaving, where negative beliefs about a former employer carry over into weaker future attachment (Rubenstein et al., 2019). Turnover Contagion yields the turnover base rate as a moderator: a high base rate depresses satisfaction and intensifies contagious withdrawal cognitions (Rubenstein et al., 2018). PWST yields the antecedent job insecurity and the mediator active job search; threatened job resources

prompt employees, often reluctant leavers, to search before resigning, partly to accumulate replacement resources (Peltokorpi & Allen, 2024).

### **Variables that decrease turnover**

HR Practices yields average pay, benefits, and training, all of which raise retention by aligning self-interest with continued employment (Shaw et al., 1998). The Unfolding Model yields decisiveness and job satisfaction: decisive individuals commit more firmly to decisions and leave less (Barrick & Zimmerman, 2005), while dissatisfaction drives exit chiefly where alternative employment has been secured (T. H. Lee et al., 2008). Job Embeddedness yields desire for the job, self-confidence, and on-the-job embeddedness: engaged, confident new hires persist (Barrick & Zimmerman, 2005), and on-the-job embeddedness aggregates retention forces that keep even dissatisfied employees in place through accumulated sacrifices (Smith et al., 2011; Peltokorpi & Sekiguchi, 2023). Movement Capital yields the moderator pay level: a reputable firm offering lower pay sends conflicting signals that paradoxically reduce turnover (Makarius et al., 2017). Retesting Behavior yields applicant status, since reapplicants are less likely to leave than first-time applicants (Breugh, 2014). Decisiveness Theory yields employee referral, where referred hires understand the role better and stay longer through a "vaccination effect" on expectations (Barrick & Zimmerman, 2005).

### **Variables with a curvilinear relationship**

Cost-Benefit Theory yields the impact variable workforce performance: turnover aids performance at low-to-moderate levels by revitalising the workforce but harms it beyond a moderate threshold, an inverted-U relationship (Moon, 2017). The Unfolding Model yields job (task) performance. Both low and high performers may exit, but for opposite reasons: low performers fear limited prospects, whereas high performers are drawn by external opportunities matching their marketable skills (Becton et al., 2017).

### **Future research gaps**

Four gaps emerge from Table 5. Theoretically, fifth-era genealogies were limited to links among the SPAR-4-SLR theories, leaving room for broader mapping; and EOR (with no qualifying study) and Context-Emergent Turnover remain underexplored. By design, longitudinal and cross-sectional surveys dominate, while case-study and grounded-theory approaches are rare. By population, food/product distribution, IT, and property agencies dominate, leaving segments such as ride-hailing drivers and non-profit employees open. By variable type, antecedents dominate while mediators and impacts remain rare across the eleven fifth-era theories.

## **CONCLUSION**

Using SPAR-4-SLR, this study identified and updated five evolutionary pathways of VTO theory (the VTO Theory Evolution Map), complemented by the genealogy and derived variables of each theory, with particular detail for the Alternative Pathway & Modern Era. Updating prior work that began with 18 theories (T. W. Lee et al., 2017), it distributes 62 theories across five pathways, making paradigm shifts and inter-theory relationships easier to map while preserving chronology, a contribution to human-resource management and retention strategy.

The study has limitations. Articles were drawn only from Scopus; the title-only search may have omitted relevant work; coverage was English-language only; genealogy and derived variables were limited to relationships among the 62 theories, with detail only for the fifth era; and era assignment reflects the authors' interpretive content analysis. Future work could strengthen reliability through independent multi-coder classification and formal inter-coder agreement, broaden coverage (for example, Web of Science) and extend the search to titles, abstracts, and keywords, and test rarely studied theories such as EOR and Context-Emergent Turnover. The mapped genealogy offers a foundation for locating the state of the art in future VTO research.

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