Macrothink Institute™

Human Resource Research
ISSN 1948-5441
2022, Vol. 6, No. 1

Turnover and Turnaway Intentions of IT Professionals and the Impact of COVID-19 on Their Work

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Received: Aug. 16, 2022 Accepted: Sep. 17, 2022 Online published: Dec. 23, 2022

doi:10.5296/hrr.v6i1.20163 URL: https://doi.org/10.5296/hrr.v6i1.20163

Abstract

This paper aimed at examining the impact of threat of professional obsolescence, updating as play or work, perceived work overload, work exhaustion, affective commitment, on turnover and turnaway intentions of IT professionals in Mauritius. A quantitative, self-administered questionnaire was used to collect data from 158 IT professionals. Contrary to previous studies, perceived work overload was negatively related to work exhaustion and updating as work was not related to turnover intentions, but was positively correlated to turnaway intentions. While 80.5% of survey participants felt they worked more at home during the COVID-19 lockdown, 62.3% were able to spend more time with their family and would work mostly from home if possible. The affective commitment of professionals towards their organization and the IT profession reduced their turnover and turnaway intentions, respectively. By rewarding their affective commitment and implementing adequate work from home strategies, the retention of IT professionals could be positively enhanced.

Keywords: Professional obsolescence; work overload; work exhaustion; affective commitment; turnover intention; turnaway intention; IT professionals; COVID-19, Mauritius

1. Introduction

It is widely acknowledged that professionals in all sectors of the economy are dealing with increased intensity, scrutiny and scope in recent years. More complex issues and greater work pressures have cropped up than ever before. This rings particularly true for information technology (IT) professionals; individuals "responsible for designing, implementing, and maintaining computer systems that gather, manage, and analyse information used by organizations" (Lohman, 2009).

To keep up-to-date with the ever evolving and competitive IT industry, more so than in other industries, IT professionals continuously need to learn new skills and take on board new and/or additional roles, making them prone to work exhaustion and job burnout. This has resulted in unusually high turnover rate in the IT sector (King et al., 2005; Shih et al., 2011). Moreover, the long working hours, lack of work-life balance, and the erosion of skills at an average speed of every two years may influence some IT professionals to turn away, i.e. change their career path to greener non-IT pastures (Loogma et al., 2004).

Many IT jobs remain unfulfilled in Mauritius (Human Resource Development Council [HRDC], 2012; 2014; 2017). Whether the IT employee chooses to move to another IT company or to completely change his or her career path to a non-IT job, turnover or turnaway results in money lost through rehiring, re-training, lower productivity and/or lower product or service quality. It has been estimated to take almost nine months to fill an IT vacancy and get a new IT employee up to speed (Witt & Burke, 2002).

The general objectives of this research were a first inspection of the relationship between variables such as professional obsolescence, updating as play or work, perceived workload, work exhaustion and affective commitment on the turnover and turnaway intentions of IT professionals in Mauritius. Understanding the mindset of IT professionals would allow IT leaders to reduce cost associated with employee turnover and turnaway by protecting operational efficiency, retaining corporate knowledge, sustaining competitiveness and increasing economic growth. Moreover, knowing what could propel a professional to leave the organisation or the IT industry can assist stakeholders of the IT industry to improve job conditions so as to increase employee morale. Given that this study was being carried out when the lockdown was applied in Mauritius due to the coronavirus pandemic, the impact of COVID-19 on the work of IT professionals was also gauged. This study is the first one carried out on turnover and turnaway intentions in any sector in Mauritius.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Job Mobility in the ICT Sector

Job mobility brings flexibility to the economy as it allows professionals to move between jobs that fit their requirements and in which they are productive. IT professionals usually have high job mobility. Some of the reasons include the very nature of the IT professional

who performs rather autonomous work, usually requires minimal supervision and who may feel the need every now and then to face new challenges; the project-oriented nature of the industry with pre-defined beginnings and endings and the competitive and evolving job market that offers diverse work opportunities (Bellini et al., 2019).

Two types of job mobility are turnover and turnaway. Carnahan et al. (2012) defined turnover in terms of employee exit from an organization and distinguished the purpose of separation as either moving to another already existing organization or creating or joining a new venture. Turnaway in the IT industry was defined by Joseph et al. (2015) in two ways. Turnaway-within is when a professional voluntarily leaves an IT job for a non-IT job within the current organization, i.e. there is a change in the occupation, but not the organization. Turnaway-between is when a professional voluntarily leaves an IT job for a non-IT job with a different organization, i.e. there is a change in both occupation and organization.

2.2 Factors Influencing Turnover of IT Professionals

Moore (2000) observed that work overload was the strongest contributor to work exhaustion and that work exhaustion was highly correlated with turnover intentions of IT professionals. Kim (2005) investigated the factors influencing state government IT employees' turnover intentions. Work exhaustion was highly positively correlated with turnover intentions. Lower turnover intentions were noted among employees who perceived being part of a participatory management approach [managers involving subordinates in areas such as decision taking and problem solving] or perceived having fair opportunities for advancement and promotion. Hassan (2014) found that among technical IT workers in a private company in Malaysia, promotion opportunities, pay level and rewards, quality of work life showed negative but significant correlations with turnover. Job stress strongly and positively impacted on turnover intention. Korsakiene (2015) wished to know whether the top reasons to stay in a company were the same as the top reasons to leave the company. Factors most cited by IT professionals to remain employed were (1) good interrelations with co-workers, (2) work-life balance, (3) competitive financial rewards and (4) interesting work, in decreasing order. On the other hand, the top four reasons to feel discontent and leave the current employer were (1) inadequate financial rewards, (2) poor leadership style, (3) lack of advancement opportunities and (4) lack of learning opportunities, in decreasing order.

2.3 Factors Influencing Turnaway of IT Professionals

Factors that lead to turnover may exacerbate into factors giving way to turnaway, should the IT professional encounter such a negative factor at several job postings in different IT companies over a number of years. Joia and Assis (2018) studied the motivations of IT professionals to leave the IT field for another functional area, whether it is within or outside the company they were employed at by using the Delphi-based approach. The pursuit of professional growth was found to be the most relevant item followed by wanting to acquire non-IT related skills via new experiences to improve chances in the job market, next being the motivation for career advancement instead of career accomplishment paradigm and in fourth position, their dissatisfaction with the IT sector in general. Distress, i.e. negative stress, is the outcome when a professional can no longer cope with work pressures using available

mental or work resources. When distress becomes too much, turnover has commonly been observed. A recent phenomenon is professionals realising that there exist pressures which are common to their field, pressures that will not change if they move from one IT company to another one. Such professionals will leave their IT careers to reduce their distress. Job insecurity has been described as one's "perceived powerlessness to maintain desired continuity in a threatened job situation" (Greenhalgh & Rosenblatt, 1984). Bellini et al. (2019) posit that in times of crisis affecting a national economy or an entire industry, companies may choose to outsource jobs to other companies located in countries where the labour cost is much lower. Substantial pressure being accentuated on companies in the same sector may lead IT professionals to resign in order to find work opportunities in other fields. Job-related burnout is the end result following prolonged exposure to constant or repeated emotional pressure in the work environment, causing motivated and committed individuals to lose their energy. Job-related burnout may result into low job satisfaction, reduced organizational commitment and employee turnover. Career change through turnaway may even occur if the professional figures out that the nature of the work is the primary cause of burnout (Shropshire & Kadlec, 2012). Shropshire and Kadlec (2012) observed that stress, job insecurity and burnout all positively influence the intentions of IT professionals to leave the IT field. With time, some professionals feel that they have become too accustomed to their job due to routineness and that they need to have new work experiences in order to continue growing professionally. However, there is often too little room for professional growth in the technical IT area. The professional can choose to either move to other functional areas in the organization where growth is still possible or turn away to other organisations to take up managerial positions after following executive education courses in management or finance, for example (Joia & Mangia, 2017).

2.4 Turnover Versus Turnaway in the IT Sector

Lee et al. (1997) revealed that IT professionals who intend to turnaway experience significantly higher role stressors, namely role conflict and role ambiguity, than those who intend only to turnover. IT professionals who choose to turnover reduce role stressors by defining their career as one of achievement (i.e. the acquisition of specialised skills and expertise). Such IT professionals who therefore continuous seek to accumulate new IT knowledge will turnover to other IT companies with sufficient opportunities for training and development. On the other hand, IT professionals who turnaway value a career of advancement (i.e. upward mobility to posts of influence and authority) reduce role stressors by leaving the IT profession and moving to another profession that provides more opportunities for upward mobility. Joia and Assis (2018) found that IT professionals who perceive success as being recognized by peers in technical areas are associated with career accomplishment and they are less likely to leave the IT profession. On the other hand, IT professionals who aspire for success in achieving higher hierarchical positions associated with growth, power and authority will more likely leave the IT field for their career advancement. While pay is a powerful tool to retain IT professionals, it may also prove to be the reason to leave a job. Gerhart and Rynes (2003) were of the view that relative pay gap, i.e. a gap in one's pay compared to the pay received by comparable colleagues, matters more in

decisions to quit than absolute pay. In this view, Joseph et al. (2015) examined the relationship between relative pay gap and job mobility of IT professionals. When faced with a relative pay gap, males tend to turn over instead of turning away-between and tend to turn away-within than turn over. On the contrary, females tend to turn away from the IT sector rather than to turn over and more shockingly, they will prefer to take on lower-status jobs that pay less than their IT jobs. Professional self-efficacy is the "belief in one's own capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to produce certain achievements or results" (Bandura, 1997). A high level of self-efficacy results into more confidence of the ability of a professional to deal with stress factors. Instead, demands and problems are considered more as challenges than as threats (Bandura, 1999; 2001). Bellini et al. (2019) investigated the influence of professional self-efficacy, job insecurity and job satisfaction on turnover or turnaway intention of IT professionals during a national crisis in Brazil. They found that professional self-efficacy negatively impacts on job insecurity and therefore positively influences job satisfaction. In turn, the feeling of job insecurity positively influences employees to turn away from the IT profession; turnaway intention is further accentuated with the occurrence of a national crisis. On the other hand, job satisfaction leads to both lower turnover and turnaway intention. Finally, older professionals are less likely to move to another organization in the IT field, but would rather choose to leave the IT profession altogether. Closer to Mauritius, Scholtz et al. (2019) carried out the first study on turnover and turnaway intentions of IT professionals in South Africa. The findings revealed that professional self-efficacy had a very significant positive correlation with both turnover and turnaway intentions, which was also positively correlated to age, work experience and IT experience. This was explained by the fact that as IT staff get older, they gather more work and IT experience and their belief in their skills increases, allowing them to find new jobs relatively easy either in the IT industry or in other industries.

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Hypotheses

As can be seen, literature reports a number of variables which influence the turnover and turnaway intentions of IT professionals. Several research models have been developed and tested by researchers over the years, e.g. Moore (2000), Kim (2005), McKnight et al. (2009), amongst many others. The present study is based on a research model derived following an informal session held with eight IT professionals whereby the possible relationships between independent and dependent variables and mediating factors were discussed.

In line with the literature review and the informal session, the following factors were used as constructs (independent variables) for the study: threat of professional obsolescence and perceived work overload. The mediating variables were work exhaustion, updating (as play or work) and affective commitment (to the organisation or the IT sector). The ultimate constructs (dependent variables) were turnover intention and turnaway intention (Figure 1).

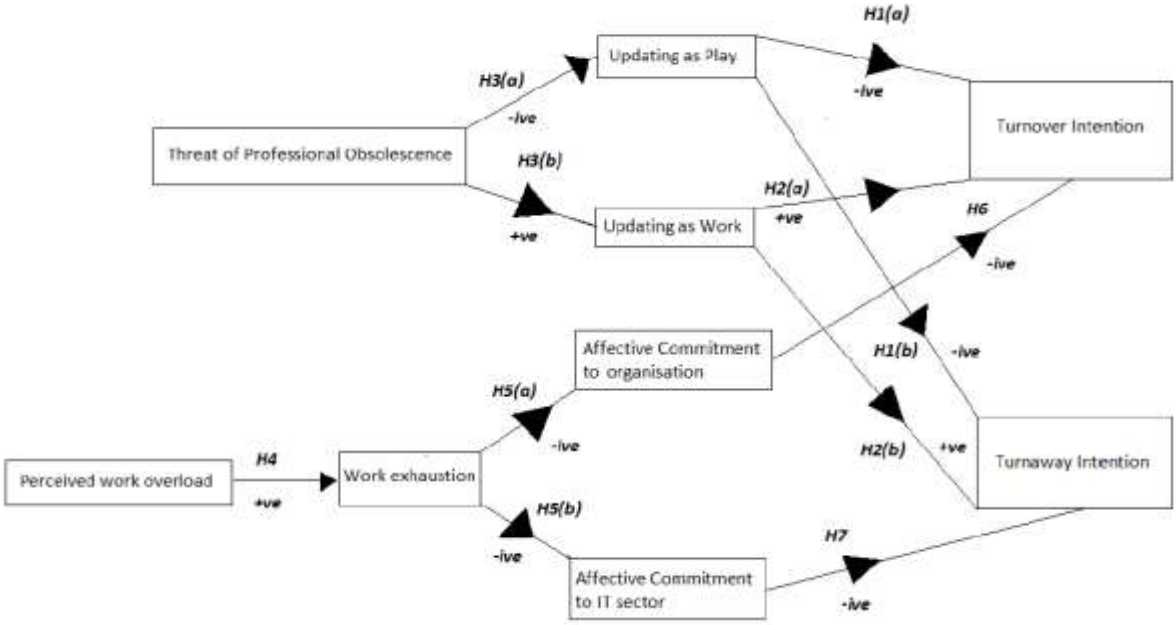

Figure 1. Research model

As postulated by Joseph et al. (2011), updating as play broadens IT professionals' knowledge and skills, enabling them to discover previously unrecognized opportunities. Therefore, one would expect that updating one's skills will reduce turnover or turnaway intentions by increasing IT professionals' embeddedness in the organization or within the IT profession, respectively.

H1: Updating-as-play will be negatively related to H1(a) turnover intentions and H1(b) turnaway intentions.

Updating as work is undertaken by IT professionals only when it is crucial for task performance/completion and is rarely done with a positive mind set (Pazy, 1996). Updating as work would be done on a more intermittent basis and therefore, such IT professionals are less likely to be up-to-speed with the ever changing IT knowledge and skills. This may be accompanied by lower levels of job performance and therefore greater turnover intentions. Moreover, the lack of up-to-date IT knowledge and skills would also limit the job alternatives or promotions within the IT sector and therefore, such IT professionals may seek greener pastures in other professions.

H2: Updating-as-work will be positively related to H2(a) turnover intentions and H2(b) turnaway intentions.

The threat of professional obsolescence would prompt IT professionals to quickly change by abandoning the updating as play mind set (which is usually free from specific goals/job constraints/tasks at work) and focusing their attention to narrower, immediate knowledge required to remain relevant in their area of expertise, consciously or unconsciously adopting the updating as work mind set at the expense of expanding IT knowledge (Joseph et al., 2011).

H3: The threat of professional obsolescence will be negatively related to H3(a) updating-as-play and will be positively related to H3(b) updating-as-work.

Employees asked to take on unachievable tasks within tight deadlines will feel overloaded with work, therefore decreasing both their effectiveness and efficiency and increasing their feeling of tedium or work exhaustion (Moore, 2000; Kim, 2005; Ahuja et al., 2007).

H4: Perceived work overload will be positively related to work exhaustion among IT professionals.

While the impact of organizational commitment on turnover and turnaway intentions has been more broadly researched in literature, its three components, namely normative, continuance, and affective, have been less studied. Due to continuance commitment, professionals remain committed to a predefined course of action in an organization often because they do not have any other job alternative. Normative commitment conditions professionals to become psychologically attached to his or her organisation through internalisation of its goals, values and missions. Affective commitment represents the emotional aspect of commitment and a few researchers have studied its influence on the behaviour of IT professionals (Cho & Huang, 2012; Brooks et al., 2015). Therefore, the following hypotheses are proposed with regards to work exhaustion affecting affective commitment, which in turn will impact on turnover and turnaway intentions.

H5: Work exhaustion will be negatively related to H5(a) affective commitment to the organization in which the IT professional is employed and to H5(b) affective commitment to the IT profession.

H6: Affective commitment to the organization in which the IT professional is currently employed will be negatively related to turnover from the organization.

H7: Affective commitment of the IT professional to the IT profession will be negatively related to turnaway from the IT sector.

3.2 Research Method and Questionnaire

The self-administered questionnaire consisted of three sections. The first section collected data about the age, gender, education level, marital status, job category and the profile of the organization IT professionals belonged to. In the second section, the questionnaire contained multiple measurement items relating to each of the constructs in the research model. Scales validated by previous researchers were used. For all items, respondents were asked to indicate the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with statements based on Likert-type scales. The variables of Threat of Professional Obsolescence, Updating as play and Updating as work were measured with three items, four items and three items, respectively [Joseph et al. (2011)]. The variables of Perceived work overload and Work exhaustion were measured with four items each [Ahuja et al. (2007)]. The variables of Affective Commitment to organisation and Affective Commitment to IT sector were measured with five items [Abdullah (2011)] and six items [Brooks et al. (2015)], respectively. The dependent variables of Turnover Intentions and Turnaway Intentions were measured with five items each [Joseph

et al. (2011)]. The third section gauged the impact of COVID-19 on the work of IT professionals. The eight survey items revolved around burnout before and during the lockdown, work-life balance before and during the lockdown and IT professionals working from home before, during and after the lockdown.

3.3 Study Population and Sample Size

According to Statistics Mauritius (2020), the number of IT professionals in 2019 was 16,162. Using Cochran's equation, a sample size of 376 was finalised taking into account a confidence level of 95% and an error margin of 5%. The survey was emailed to IT professionals in small, medium and large companies, parastatal bodies and ministries, with a link to the questionnaire uploaded online as a Google Form document.

3.4 Ethical Considerations, Assumptions and Delimitations

Potential respondents were assured of their confidentiality and anonymity and they were under no obligation to fill in their email address in the Google Form if they did not wish to. The major assumption in this study was that survey participants gave truthful and sincere responses after careful reflection on each query. As for delimitations, it is a known fact that many freshers when leaving high school or university join a Business Process Outsourcing (BPO) company for a first job. These non-technical freshers working in back-office or front-office business process outsourcing, with skills such as basic computer knowledge, ability to browse the internet, ability to send and receive emails, typing speed, data entry, language fluency, and basic expertise in Office, often leave as soon as they find a better job. All IT interns not having at least three years' experience in the IT field were therefore excluded from the survey data.

4. Results

At the end of the allocated time of one and a half months for collection of responses for the survey, it was found that the online questionnaire was filled by 166 participants. Following data cleaning, a final number of 158 IT professionals was found to have responded to all sections and questions in the questionnaire. Although this was below the targeted sample size of 376 respondents, a response rate of 42% is an acceptable value as email response rates may only approximate 25% to 30% without follow-up/reminder e-mails and reinforcements (Sheehan, 2001).

4.1 Profile of IT Professional and Company/Organisation

Respondents were generally young (63% aged 31 to 34 years and a further 23% aged 18 to 30 years), mostly male (57%) and well-educated since 34% had a bachelor's degree, 58% had a masters or PhD and only 8% had a diploma or less. The sample can also be outlined to be an accurate profile although there is a slight bias towards better educated IT professionals. The respondents appear to be very experienced with 52% of them having between 11 and 20 years of work and IT experience. Most of the respondents work for the private sector (70%) so the sample represents a slight bias towards private organizations, however the sample still contains a number of employees working in the public sector (27%).

4.2 Reliability Testing

The reliability of the constructs, i.e. the survey items was first computed by calculating the internal consistency measure for each of the scales. The Cronbach's alpha of each scale is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Reliability analysis of survey constructs

Variables	No. of survey items	Cronbach's Alpha	Internal consistency of scale
Threat of Professional Obsolescence	3	0.929	Excellent
Updating as play	4	0.771	Acceptable
Updating as work	3	0.846	Good
Perceived work overload	4	0.882	Good
Work exhaustion	4	0.946	Excellent
Affective commitment to organization	6	0.812	Good
Affective commitment to IT sector	5	0.812	Good
Turnover intention	5	0.893	Good
Turnaway intention	5	0.890	Good

The values of Cronbach's Alpha for all constructs ranged from 0.771 to 0.946. It is generally taken that values of reliability coefficients above 0.7 are considered acceptable, values above 0.8 are good or preferable while values above 0.9 are excellent. Values obtained by Joseph et al. (2011) for the internal consistency of Professional Obsolescence, Updating as play and Updating as work were 0.927, 0.905 and 0.915, respectively. In the current study, the Cronbach's alpha coefficients calculated were 0.929, 0.771 and 0.846, respectively. For Perceived work overload and Work exhaustion, Ahuja et al. (2007) obtained Cronbach's alpha values of 0.94 for both. Here, the reliability coefficients were 0.882 and 0.946, respectively. Abdullah (2011) reported a reliability coefficient of above 0.60 and Brooks et al. (2015) reported a Cronbach's alpha value of 0.865 for Affective commitment to organisation and Affective commitment to IT sector, respectively. Values computed here were 0.812 for both. Finally, reliability values for Turnover intentions and Turnaway Intentions presented by Joseph et al. (2011) in their study were 0.894 and 0.937. In this research work, the values obtained were 0.893 and 0.890, respectively.

4.3 Hypothesis Testing

The research hypotheses formulated were tested using the Pearson Correlation Coefficient (r) to determine the strength, direction and statistical significance of correlation. Cohen (1988) has suggested that a value of r from 0.10-0.29, 0.30-0.49 and 0.50-1.0 represents a small, medium and large correlation, respectively.

H1: Updating-as-play will be negatively related to H1(a) turnover intentions and H1(b) turnaway intentions.

Based on the Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient analysis performed, it was

observed that there is no correlation between the variables Updating as Play and Turnover Intentions. Therefore, H1(a) is not supported. There is a small negative correlation between the variables Updating as Play and Turnaway Intentions. H1(b) is therefore supported ($r = -0.208$, $n = 158$, $p < 0.001$). Similar results were obtained by Joseph et al. (2011), who revealed that that updating-as-play does not influence turnover intentions and is negatively correlated to turnaway intentions ($r = -0.352$, $p < 0.01$). The authors suggested that if an organisation has a good training plan in place for its IT employees' personal and professional development, employees may be inclined to continue to upgrade their knowledge and skills and thus continue working there.

H2: Updating-as-work will be positively related to H2(a) turnover intentions and H2(b) turnaway intentions.

There is no correlation between the variables Updating as Work and Turnover Intentions. Therefore, H2(a) is not supported. There is a small positive correlation between the variables Updating as Work and Turnaway Intentions. H2(b) is therefore supported ($r = 0.247$, $n = 158$, $p < 0.001$). Unlike Joseph et al. (2011) who noted that updating as work has a small contribution towards turnover intentions and is not related to turnaway intentions, this study revealed that updating-as-work is not related to turnover intentions, but would instead prompt IT professionals to turn away from the IT profession altogether. As Loogma et al. (2004) proposed, IT professionals having to continuously keep up with the latest technologies and upgrade their knowledge, as IT skills tend to erode at a mean pace of every two years, may become both physically and mentally tiring after some years spent in the IT industry. Such professionals may wish to move to greener non-IT pastures, especially if the organisation where they are employed does not support their skills acquisition either time-wise or with financial incentives.

H3: The threat of professional obsolescence will be negatively related to H3(a) updating as play and will be positively related to H3(b) updating as work.

There is a medium negative correlation between the variables Threat of Professional Obsolescence and Updating as Play. H3(a) is therefore supported ($r = -0.324$, $n = 158$, $p < 0.001$). There is a medium positive correlation between the variables Threat of Professional Obsolescence and Updating as Work. H3(b) is therefore supported ($r = 0.430$, $n = 158$, $p < 0.001$). Similar results were noted by Joseph et al. (2011), with the threat of professional obsolescence being negatively correlated to updating as play ($r = -0.248$, $p < 0.01$) and being positively correlated to updating as work ($r = 0.215$, $p < 0.01$).

H4: Perceived work overload will be positively related to work exhaustion among IT professionals.

There is a medium negative correlation ($r = -0.373$, $n = 158$, $p < .001$) between the variables Perceived work overload and Work exhaustion. This result was most surprising as many studies (e.g. Moore, 2000; Kim, 2005; Ahuja et al., 2007) have shown that perceived work overload is the most significant contributor to work exhaustion in the IT sector. Here, perceived work overload is a negative predictor for work exhaustion based on the responses.

One possible reason could be that IT personnel have grown accustomed to working generally more than 40 hours per week, whether it is at the office or working remotely and are therefore suited to better absorb any work overloads, which in turn results in less work exhaustion. Another possible explanation could be that the younger generation (63% accounting for the age group 31 to 40 years old) feel that absorbing a higher workload results in advanced progress along their career path at a faster rate. This could be the reason why IT employees do not want to demonstrate any work exhaustion from work overload in fear that they will not be given new responsibilities or be involved in new projects.

H5: Work exhaustion will be negatively related to H5(a) affective commitment to the organization in which the IT professional is currently employed and to H5(b) affective commitment to the IT profession.

The analysis performed showed that the variables Work exhaustion and Affective commitment to the organisation had a medium negative relationship. H5(a) is therefore supported ($r = -0.302$, $n = 158$, $p < 0.001$). Generally, exposing IT professionals to longer hours under tight deadlines can induce more exhaustion which in turn has several impacts ranging from a decrease in the quality of the work performed, health issues for the IT professionals and more importantly a stronger need for the individual to become less affiliated to this organization and look for other opportunities in other IT companies which can guarantee a better work-life balance ratio. This theory is respected when correlating work exhaustion to affective commitment to IT organization. There is no correlation between the variables Work exhaustion and Affective commitment to the IT Sector. Therefore, H5(b) is not supported. When correlating work exhaustion with affective commitment to IT sector, an anomaly is noted. Whilst there is also a medium negative correlation between work exhaustion and affective commitment to IT sector, there is no significance in this relationship ($p > 0.05$). This means that no effect was observed between work exhaustion and affective commitment to IT sector which can be explained by the fact that work exhaustion does not necessarily drive people to turnaway from IT and other non-IT job sectors can also induce higher work exhaustion levels.

H6: Affective commitment to the organization in which the IT professional is currently employed will be negatively related to turnover from the organization.

There was a strong, negative correlation between the two variables, $r = -0.648$, $n = 158$, $p < 0.001$, with high levels of affective commitment to organization giving rise to lower levels of turnover intentions. H6 is therefore supported. This strong negative relationship is a well-proven theory in IT studies on turnover intentions (Joseph et al., 2007).

H7: Affective commitment of the IT professional to the IT profession will be negatively related to turnaway from the IT sector.

A strong, negative correlation was noted between the two variables, $r = -0.539$, $n = 158$, $p < 0.001$, with higher levels of affective commitment to the IT Sector inducing lower levels of turnaway intentions. H7 is therefore supported. Brooks et al. (2015) obtained a similar result ($r = -0.612$, $p < 0.001$) for IT professionals.

The outcome of the hypotheses tested is summarised in Table 2 and the final research model with calculated Pearson correlations coefficients and significance is shown in Figure 2. [Table 2 and Figure 2]

Table 2. Outcome of Hypothesis Tests

Hypothesis	Path	r value	P value	Supported?
H1(a)	Updating as play → Turnover intention	-	-	No
H1(b)	Updating as play → Turnaway intention	-0.208	$p < 0.001$	Yes
H2(a)	Updating as work → Turnover intention	-	-	No
H2(b)	Updating as work → Turnaway intention	0.247	$p < 0.01$	Yes
H3(a)	Threat of professional obsolescence → Updating as play	-0.324	$p < 0.001$	Yes
H3(b)	Threat of professional obsolescence → Updating as work	0.430	$p < 0.001$	Yes
H4	Perceived work overload → Work exhaustion	-0.373	$p < 0.001$	Yes
H5(a)	Work exhaustion → Affective commitment to organization	-0.302	$p < 0.001$	Yes
H5(b)	Work exhaustion → Affective commitment to IT profession	-	-	No
H6	Affective commitment to organization → Turnover intention	-0.648	$p < 0.001$	Yes
H7	Affective commitment to IT profession → Turnaway intention	-0.539	$p < 0.001$	Yes

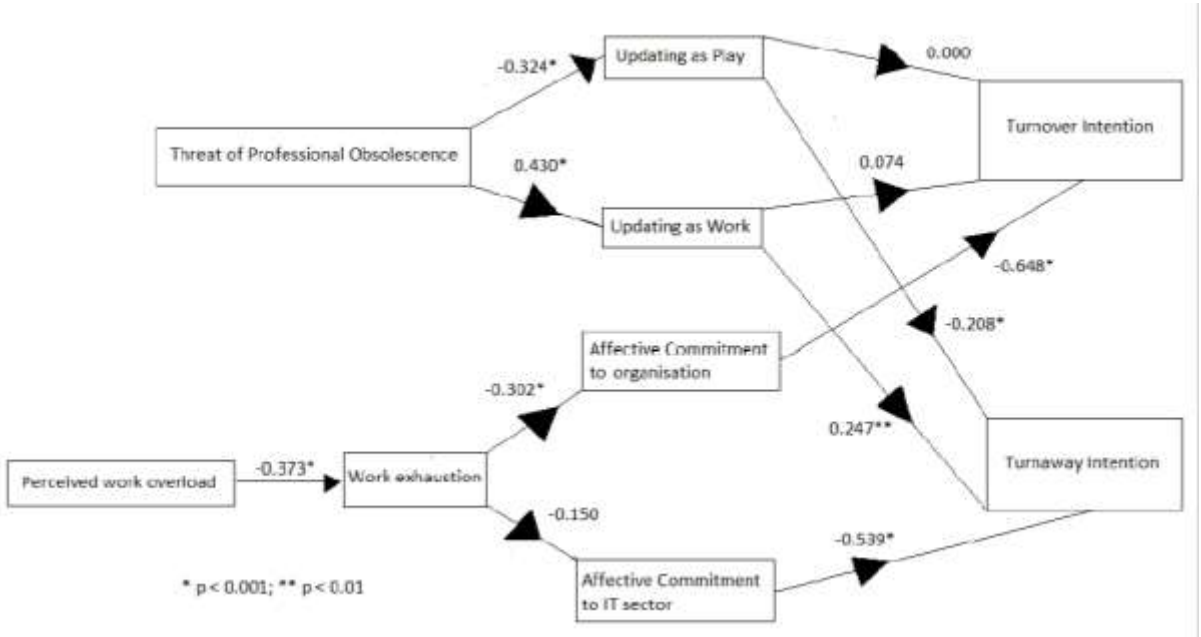

Figure 2. Final research model

The most surprisingly result was that unlike the positive relationship shown in numerous

studies, perceived work overload was found to be negatively related to work exhaustion. Moreover, unlike previously demonstrated that updating as work has a small contribution towards turnover intentions and is not related to turnaway intentions, this study revealed that updating as work is not related to turnover intentions, but is instead positively correlated to turnaway intentions. In line with other studies, the affective commitment of professionals towards the organization they are currently employed in and the affective commitment towards the IT profession reduced their turnover and turnaway intentions, respectively.

4.4 Impact of COVID-19 on IT Professionals

Respondents were asked to select a maximum of five statements from a set of eight (Table 3).

Table 3. Impact of COVID-19 on the work

	Percentage (%)
Burnout	
I have felt burned out working at the office in the past.	33.8
I felt less burned out working from home during the lockdown.	37.7
Work-life balance	
I was not spending enough time with my family in the past due to work commitments.	57.1
I was able to spend more time with my family at home during the lockdown.	62.3
Impact of COVID-19 right before lockdown	
Right before the lockdown was announced, I had a lot of work to do at the office.	27.3
Work from home (WFH)	
I worked even more than usual at home during the lockdown.	80.5
The company policy in place already allowed working from home sometimes even before the lockdown.	41.6
If given the choice, I would work mostly from home.	62.3
I missed my colleagues and my workplace during the lockdown and I would prefer not working from home.	20.8

The most popular combination of five choices was as follows:

(1) I was not spending enough time with my family in the past due to work commitments - 57.1%
(2) I worked even more than usual at home during the lockdown - 80.5%
(3) I felt less burned out working from home during the lockdown - 37.7%
(4) I was able to spend more time with my family at home during the lockdown - 62.3%
(5) If given the choice, I would work mostly from home - 62.3%

The COVID-19 pandemic has reshaped the way the whole world works, keeps in touch, gets instructed and shops. ICT workers have been praised and described as "unsung heroes" by the International Telecommunications Union (ITU), recognising that ICT services and ICT

networks have not been easy to manage. This has been due to online traffic sometimes tripling under the massive surge for videoconferencing, smartphone call capacity and collaborative work brought on by work from home and study at home policies (Devdiscourse, 2020).

27.3% of respondents saw their workload increase dramatically at the office right before the lockdown was announced. It was probably due to the long and hectic hours IT put in right before the lockdown in a short period of time to allow people in their company to be able to work from home: urgently procuring laptops and connection devices such as dongles and installing VPN and other required software for video conferencing such as Zoom or collaborative software such as Microsoft Teams.

An overwhelming 80.5% of respondents affirmed that they worked even more than usual at home during the lockdown in Mauritius. Indeed, such an observation was also seen in the United States of America. According to a study carried out by the US National Bureau of Economic Research [DeFilippis et al. (2020)], it was found that the average workday during lockdown was 48 minutes longer. However, while the study reported extended working hours, it was unclear whether this increase in the average workday span emanated from employees adopting a flexible arrangement to accommodate household demands or due to a lack of clear delineation between the office and home whereby employees tended to overwork. The longer working hours could also be a result of IT professionals providing support and technical assistance to non-IT workers (in departments other than IT) while doing their own work, resulting into increased workloads, higher expectations from bosses and colleagues and ever more blurred boundaries between work and personal life (Liu and Wu, 2020).

33.8% of respondents have felt burned out working at the office in the past and 37.7% of respondents felt less burned out working from home during the lockdown. This is in clear contrast with other studies abroad. A survey carried out on the evolution of burnout (COVID-19 edition) has revealed that almost 62% of tech workers were burned out in February 2020 pre-COVID-19, while in April, nearly 74% of tech workers reported that they were experiencing burnout during COVID-19 (blind.com, 2020). Due to the strict control on people's movement, remote working has led to IT workers being 'available at any time' as expected by bosses and colleagues, with bosses checking on their subordinates at any time and colleagues calling "to confirm working requests at 11 p.m." (Liu and Wu, 2020).

Despite a whopping 80.5% of respondents affirming that they worked even more than usual at home during the lockdown in Mauritius, 62.3% supported both statements that they were able to spend more time with their family at home during the lockdown and if given the choice, they would work mostly from home. Despite people teleworking in less than ideal situations alongside their "kids, in unsuitable spaces, with no choice and no in-office days", they still wanted preferred to work from home (Gorlick, 2020).

It is no secret that people value freedom of choice. Some of the top benefits of teleworking include a flexible schedule, less time spent commuting to work in public transport or stuck in traffic jams when using their own vehicles, more time spent with the family leading to better work-life balance, among others. It is also to be noted that the survey results indicated that

among those IT professionals who expressed their wish to work mostly from home, 52% of them are parents with kids. In the US also, 86% of parents with kids surveyed in a study now want to work flexibly, compared to 46% of parents with kids before the pandemic (Routley, 2020).

However, it is to be noted that one-fifth of respondents (20.8%) missed their colleagues and workplace during the lockdown and would prefer not working from home. This is not a new phenomenon. Some studies carried out in the pre-COVID-19 era have shown that despite productivity gains from WFH, the reason why half of the surveyed remote workers wished to go back to the office was loneliness. This is even more telling since those remote workers were not in lockdown conditions: only people with a spare room, no children or flatmates at home and working at least one day per week in the office took part in those studies (Bloom et al., 2015). During the lockdown, almost half (46%) of UK workers have experienced loneliness while working from home (Totaljobs, 2020). WFH may boost productivity, but it may be costly in terms of creativity, inspiration, idea-sharing and friendships, especially among younger workers (Usborne, 2020).

The right balance between productivity gains and escaping from loneliness from WFH may just be the more flexible hybrid model: combining remote work with office work. Hybrid work would grant more autonomy and freedom to employees about how to fit work around the rest of their lives, rather than structuring other parts of a weekday around hours logged in an office. Hybrid work would mean the best of both worlds: structure and sociability on one hand, and independence and flexibility on the other (Ro, 2020). In China, it is being predicted that employees will spend a ratio of 60:40 split between onsite work and remote work in 10 years' time (Microsoft, 2020).

4. Discussion

4.1 Limitations

Several limitations to this research should be noted. The response rate to the survey was low. There is potential bias due to the fact that the study had a larger sample of better educated IT professionals (34% had a bachelor's degree and 58% had a Master's degree or PhD), 57% of respondents were male despite attempts to get more female IT professionals to fill in the survey by contacting some of them directly on LinkedIn, and most of the respondents work for the private sector (70%). This study used turnover/turnaway intention instead of actual turnover/turnaway data. Although many studies have shown that turnover/turnaway intention predicts actual turnover/turnaway adequately, Tett and Meyer (1993) indicated that turnover intention accounts for only 27% of turnover variance.

4.2 Recommendations

Teleworking was already being implemented in many countries since years. Worldwide lockdowns have made WFH a large scale 'forced experiment' for millions of workers during the COVID-19 crisis, when whole industries have had to continue to operate provided they had the basic technology in place. It is crystal clear though that the fast pace with which many firms adapted to the pandemic by shifting their office-based workers to conduct a large

number of jobs from home indicates that the use of telework pre-crisis remained well below what is feasible (OECD, 2020). A majority of surveyed IT professionals have stated that they wished to work from home whenever possible. For companies which have coped well with employees working from home during the pandemic, they might well see an increase in flexible working requests. However, it is imperative that employers do not force such WFH strategies on anyone and everyone. Whether companies increasingly implement WFH strategies or the more flexible hybrid model of combining a few days of remote work with a few days of office work per week or month, employers need to ensure employees are being kept informed of all happenings, whether it is events or projects, through weekly team calls or face to face meetings. As one of the respondents pointed out: "WFH is good and appreciated if the communication maturity of the organisation is high and fluid. However, if the communication is not good enough in a high tech company, then WFH puts a lot of strain on the team. In these situations, a flexible balance of WFH & Work from Office (WFO) is highly appreciated."

4.3 Conclusion

This paper, which marked the first study conducted on turnover and turnaway intentions in any sector in Mauritius, investigated the relationship between variables such as threat of professional obsolescence, updating as play or work, perceived work overload, work exhaustion, affective commitment, and turnover / turnaway intentions of IT professionals in Mauritius. While most relationships were found to behave as per literature, two major deviations were noted: perceived work overload was negatively related to work exhaustion and updating as work was not related to turnover intentions, but was positively correlated to turnaway intentions. The impact of COVID-19 on the work of IT professionals was also investigated. Although 80.5% of survey participants felt they worked more at home during the COVID-19 lockdown, 62.3% were able to spend more time with their family and would work mostly from home if possible. The implementation of appropriate work from home strategies need to be looked into in order to encourage more IT professionals to continue thriving in their endeavours.

Acknowledgments

Special thanks are given to both anonymous and known survey participants for their honest responses and to Dr V Teeroovengadum, Senior Lecturer in Management at the University of Mauritius.

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