



## **UNDERSTANDING THE EMPLOYEE EXIT EXPERIENCE: A MULTI-THEORETICAL AND MULTI-STAGE REVIEW**

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### **Abstract:**

*Employee turnover research has traditionally focused on antecedents and outcomes, overlooking the subjective, emotional, and relational dimensions of how employees experience organizational exit. This review reconceptualizes the employee exit experience as a temporally extended, multi-stage process encompassing pre-exit cognitive and emotional disengagement, interactional and procedural dynamics during the transition, and post-exit identity reconstruction and narrative formation. Integrating five theoretical perspectives which are the Unfolding Model of Turnover, Psychological Contract Theory, Social Exchange Theory, Employee Voice Theory, and Affective Events Theory. The review proposes a multi-theoretical framework that captures the cognitive, affective, and reputational complexities of exit. The review highlights how pre-exit factors such as job dissatisfaction, organizational commitment, and perceived support shape disengagement; how interactional fairness and communication during offboarding influence affective tone; and how post-exit storytelling and alumni relationships impact organizational reputation and talent attraction. It concludes by identifying key research gaps, including the need for qualitative, longitudinal, and cross-cultural studies examining exit dynamics and reputational spillovers in transparent labor markets. Overall, this review positions the employee exit experience as a strategic and relational phenomenon, reframing exit not as an endpoint but as an ongoing process with enduring implications for individual identity, organizational culture, and employer reputation.*

### **Keywords:**

Exit experience, Turnover, Offboarding, Employer reputation

### **1. Introduction**

Employee turnover has long constituted a central research domain in organizational behavior, labor economics, and human resource management. Historically, scholarly attention has centered on identifying the antecedents of voluntary turnover such as job satisfaction, organizational commitment, perceived organizational support, and psychological contract breach and examining the consequences of turnover for both individuals and organizations (Lee & Mitchell, 1994; Hom et al., 2017). However, this predominantly antecedent-outcome orientation has resulted in a fragmented understanding of the subjective and processual nature of how employees experience the act of exiting an organization. Increasingly, scholars have argued that turnover should not be conceptualized merely as a discrete behavioral event but rather as a multi-stage psychological and social process marked by meaning-making, identity shifts, and relational reconfigurations (Rubenstein et al., 2018).

In contemporary organizational contexts characterized by heightened workforce mobility, intensified employer scrutiny via digital platforms, and the strategic importance of employer branding, the way employees experience their departure has acquired heightened salience. The proliferation of organizational review platforms, such as Glassdoor and Indeed, has amplified the reputational consequences of exit experiences far beyond internal organizational boundaries. As such, the employee exit experience now extends into a broader public sphere where former employees' narratives—positive or negative—shape employer attractiveness, organizational legitimacy, and talent acquisition (Suen et al., 2020; Stockman et al., 2020). This evolution necessitates a reconceptualization of exit as a phenomenon with both intrapersonal and inter-organizational implications.

The employee exit experience may be defined as the subjective, emotional, cognitive, and relational process through which an individual psychologically disengages from an employing organization and transitions toward post-employment identity and affiliations (Holtom et al., 2008; Rubenstein et al., 2018). Although it has not yet been fully defined in the literature unlike traditional turnover frameworks, which focus primarily on withdrawal cognitions and quit decisions, this construct emphasizes the holistic lived experience; before, during, and after. It encompasses the precipitating events that trigger exit considerations, the interpersonal and organizational interactions during the resignation and offboarding process, and the post-exit reflections and narratives that individuals construct and share. In this respect, the exit experience is inherently temporal, relational, and meaning-laden, warranting theoretical integration beyond linear turnover models.

While several theoretical perspectives provide partial explanatory value, no single framework sufficiently captures the multifaceted nature of exit experiences. The Unfolding Model of Turnover provides insight into shock-driven decision pathways; Psychological Contract Theory reveals how perceived breaches influence emotional disengagement and exit intentions; Social Exchange Theory accounts for reciprocity dynamics; Employee Voice Theory elucidates pre-exit expression or suppression of concerns; and Affective Events Theory underscores emotional episodes that shape exit sensemaking. A multi-theoretical lens is thus essential to fully understand exit as a lived experience rather than a binary organizational outcome.

Given the above, this review seeks to: synthesize key theoretical foundations relevant to conceptualizing the employee exit experience; delineate the processual dimensions of exit across pre-exit, exit, and post-exit phases; and discuss the individual and organizational implications of exit experiences. By doing so, the review responds to calls for a more nuanced and holistic understanding of employee exits, positioning exit as a strategic phenomenon rather than an administrative endpoint.

## **2. Theoretical Foundations**

The employee exit experience is best understood through an integrative theoretical perspective, as no single framework sufficiently explains the cognitive, affective, and relational complexities inherent in the process of exiting an organization. This section outlines the principal theoretical lenses that have shaped scholarly conceptualizations of employee exit and provides a rationale for a multi-theoretical approach.

### **2.1. The Unfolding Model of Turnover**

The Unfolding Model of Turnover (Lee & Mitchell, 1994) marked a conceptual departure from traditional attitudinal models by positing that turnover is often triggered by “shocks”—discrete, identifiable events that prompt an employee to reconsider their organizational attachment. These shocks may be positive (e.g., unsolicited job offer), negative (e.g., perceived injustice), or neutral (e.g., relocation of spouse). The model delineates multiple decision paths through which employees cognitively process shocks, evaluate scripts, and enact exit decisions (Holtom & Inderrieden, 2006). Within the context of the exit experience, this framework underscores the importance of critical incidents that initiate the psychological disengagement process. However, while the Unfolding Model elucidates pre-exit triggers and decision-making logics, it does not address the subjective experience of exit, nor does it consider the relational or reputational aftermath of departure.

### **2.2. Psychological Contract Theory**

Psychological Contract Theory (Rousseau, 1995) offers a compelling lens for understanding the emotional dimension of exit. Psychological contracts entail employees’ perceptions of mutual obligations between themselves and the organization. Perceived breach or violation of these obligations has consistently been linked to diminished trust, declining organizational commitment, negative affect, and increased turnover intentions (Topa et al., 2022). In the context of exit experience, psychological contract breach shapes not only the decision to leave but the emotional tone of the exit. Employees who perceive contract violation often articulate their departure narratives through themes of disappointment, betrayal or moral injustice, which in turn influence post-exit sensemaking and external communication. Consequently, psychological contract breach has implications for negative employee voice and reputational spillovers.

### **2.3. Social Exchange Theory**

Rooted in Blau's (1964) seminal work, Social Exchange Theory conceptualizes the employment relationship as a reciprocity-based exchange whereby individuals evaluate the balance of contributions and returns. Exit becomes more likely when perceived reciprocity erodes or when the socioemotional exchange deteriorates. Importantly, exit experience is deeply embedded in relational dynamics; positive and respectful exit processes can preserve relational ties and lead to alumni advocacy, whereas transactional, bureaucratic, or insensitive offboarding practices may damage relational equity. Social Exchange Theory thus provides an analytical basis for examining how the quality of the exit relationship influences post-exit loyalty or antagonism.

### **2.4. Employee Voice Theory**

Employee Voice Theory (Hirschman, 1970; Morrison, 2014) is central to understanding pre-exit dynamics. Before exiting, employees often engage in cognitive evaluations of whether to "voice" concerns, remain silent, or leave. Suppression of voice due to fear of retaliation, low psychological safety, or perceived futility of raising issues may strongly associated with negative exit experiences. Employees who feel silenced typically construct exit narratives that portray the organization as unresponsive or unjust, increasing the likelihood of negative word-of-mouth during the post-exit stage. Thus, the voice–silence dynamic is an essential predictor of whether the exit experience will be constructive or adversarial.

### **2.5. Affective Events Theory**

Affective Events Theory (Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996) posits that emotional events at work elicit affective reactions that shape attitudes and behaviours over time. Applied to exit, emotionally charged episodes—such as conflict with a supervisor, recognition experiences, or value incongruence—accumulate and form a trajectory of affective evaluations that influence how employees interpret their departure. The exit experience is thus not merely a rational decision but is profoundly shaped by emotional episodes that color pre-exit and post-exit reflections.

### **2.6. The Case for a Multi-Theoretical Perspective**

While each theoretical lens contributes uniquely, the complexity of exit as a lived experience necessitates integration. The Unfolding Model describes why exit considerations begin; Psychological Contract and Affective Events explain how employees feel; Social Exchange and Voice Theory shed light on relational and communicative aspects; and contemporary employer branding and reputation scholarship clarifies why exit experiences matter strategically. An integrative perspective therefore may enable a holistic account of the cognitive, affective, relational, and reputational dimensions of exit.

## **3. The Employee Exit Experience as a Multi-Stage Process**

A core proposition of this review is that the exit experience is not a singular event but a temporally extended process panning three relatively distinct yet interconnected phases: the pre-exit phase, the exit/transition phase, and the post-exit phase. Understanding these phases provides insight into the unfolding of psychological, relational, and symbolic transitions that employees undergo.

Therefore, exit experience starts with exit reason of employees. Employees may leave their organizations for a variety of reasons. In the literature, three primary categories of exit are commonly emphasized: voluntary turnover, retirement, and layoffs. Voluntary turnover occurs when employees choose to leave their current organization, often due to the appeal of a new employment opportunity elsewhere. Various motives may underlie this decision, such as dissatisfaction with one's employer or the desire for career advancement (Lee, Gerhart, Weller, & Trevor, 2008). This form of turnover is often considered avoidable, as organizations may have the capacity to retain such employees by addressing their professional and developmental needs (Abelson, 1987). Nevertheless, voluntary turnover may also be unavoidable from the employer's perspective, particularly in cases where employees leave to pursue further education, relocate, or prioritize family responsibilities (Barrick & Zimmerman, 2005, 2009).

Another form of exit transition is retirement. Retirement refers to the process through which individuals withdraw from the workforce, typically accompanied by a gradual decrease in psychological attachment to work and increased disengagement from one's career (Shultz & Wang, 2011). While organizations may attempt to retain older employees

by offering extended employment, modified roles, or advisory positions, financial considerations often play a decisive role in determining when and how employees fully retire (Wang & Shultz, 2010).

A third key driver of exit transitions involves layoffs. Workforce reductions typically result from economic downturns experienced at the organizational, industry, or societal level (Guthrie & Datta, 2008). Strategic organizational changes may also lead to departmental restructuring and, subsequently, the dismissal of employees. Layoffs often disproportionately affect individuals with lower job performance, reduced cognitive ability, or weaker organizational commitment (Zatzick, Deery, & Iverson, 2015). Recent research highlights that providing clarity and transparency around the layoff process can support affected employees in navigating the transition more effectively. In addition, organizations can facilitate a smoother exit by offering outplacement services and transition support, which have been shown to improve the experience of laid-off employees (Klotz, Swider, Shao, & Prengler, 2021).

### **3.1. Pre-Exit Phase: Cognitive and Emotional Disengagement**

The pre-exit phase begins when an employee first experiences withdrawal cognitions, often triggered by a shock, cumulative dissatisfaction, or psychological contract breach (Klotz, Swider, Shao, & Prengler, 2021). During this stage, employees engage in sensemaking, evaluating whether misalignments are temporary or structural. Emotional detachment frequently precedes behavioural disengagement, and employees may reduce organizational citizenship behaviours and discretionary effort. Affective and cognitive withdrawal are further shaped by perceived organizational justice and voice opportunities; where perceived injustice or silencing is present, disengagement accelerates. The pre-exit phase concludes with the decision to resign, typically accompanied by identity reorientation toward prospective futures.

In the pre-exit phase job dissatisfaction, career and alternative job opportunities, leader–member exchange, work–life balance, and organizational culture play a significant role. To begin with, job satisfaction is a key determinant of employees' exit experiences (Holtom & Inderrieden, 2006). Studies have shown that employees who are dissatisfied with their jobs or working environments are more likely to report negative exit experiences (Klotz et al., 2021; Hom et al., 2017).

One of the most common reasons for employee turnover is the availability of alternative job and career opportunities. Employees' perceptions of job opportunities influence their pre-exit experiences (Holtom et al., 2008; Mitchell et al., 2001), and those who believe that many job opportunities are available to them are more likely to report negative exit experiences.

Similarly, studies show that leader–member exchange—defined as the quality of the relationship and communication between employees and their supervisors—can shape the employee exit experience (Ballinger et al., 2010). Findings indicate that employees who maintain a positive relationship with their managers are more likely to experience positive exits.

Work–life balance is also an important predictor of employees' exit experiences (Aryee et al., 2005). Employees who achieve a more favorable work–life balance tend to have a lower likelihood of negative exit experiences. Moreover, organizational justice, a key component of organizational culture, has been found to influence how employees experience the exit process (Colquitt et al., 2013). Employees who perceive high levels of fairness in their organization are more likely to report positive exit experiences compared to those who perceive lower levels of justice.

### **3.2. Exit/Transition Phase: Interactional and Procedural Components**

The exit or transition phase encapsulates the period beginning with the resignation announcement and ending with the employee's final day in the organization. The quality of interpersonal treatment by supervisors and HR, procedural fairness during offboarding, and the degree of support offered during transition collectively shape the experiential tone of departure (Klotz et al., 2021; Akshatha & Ganesh, 2017). Respectful communication, acknowledgment of contributions, knowledge transfer support, and closure rituals (e.g., farewell meetings) foster positive exit experiences and preserve relational goodwill. In contrast, managerial withdrawal, stigmatization, exclusion, or bureaucratic indifference engender negative affect, amplify perceptions of injustice, and increase the likelihood of negative post-exit narratives. This phase thus represents a critical inflection point where organizational actions can mitigate or intensify emotional and reputational consequences.

The overall experience an employee has throughout their tenure within an organization can shape the nature of their exit experience. For instance, employees who have had predominantly positive experiences during their employment

are more likely to report a positive exit experience, whereas those who have encountered negative experiences are more likely to have a negative exit experience upon leaving the organization (König et al., 2021). In addition, a positive employee experience can contribute to higher retention, thereby reducing turnover frequency and improving the overall exit experience for those who eventually leave (Holtom et al., 2008). Conversely, negative employee experiences may contribute to increased turnover rates, which in turn can lead to a higher frequency of negative exit experiences (König et al., 2021).

### **3.3. Post-Exit Phase: Identity Reconstruction and Narrative Formation**

Post-exit, individuals enter a transitional identity space in which they cognitively and emotionally reconstruct their former employment relationship, reinterpret past experiences, and craft exit narratives that help make sense of their departure (Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010; Ashforth, 2001). This identity work is shaped by sensemaking processes that continue beyond organizational membership and influence how former employees evaluate their previous employer considering subsequent career experiences and social comparisons (Mitchell & Lee, 2001). During this phase, ex-employees frequently engage in storytelling within their personal and professional networks, including through digital platforms such as LinkedIn, Glassdoor, and other employer review sites, which can amplify reputational spillovers (Kang & Sung, 2019; Van Hove & Lievens, 2009). Sharing of exit narratives contributes to the formation of alumni discourse—either reinforcing or reshaping the collective image of the employer in the talent market.

Positive exit experiences can foster organizational alumni identity, relational continuity, and future cooperation with the employer, which in turn can translate into alumni advocacy, employer referrals, brand ambassadorship, and even “boomerang employment” (returning to the organization after a period elsewhere) (Shipp et al., 2014; Arnold et al., 2020). Organizations that maintain respectful exit practices and sustain post-exit relationships through alumni networks benefit from increased social capital and long-term employer brand equity (Somaya et al., 2008). Conversely, negative exit experiences—especially those involving perceptions of injustice or psychological contract breach—can generate lingering resentment and disengagement, which may manifest in negative word-of-mouth that damages employer reputation, discourages job applicants, and weakens talent attraction (Morrison & Robinson, 1997; Van Hove & Lievens, 2009). Such reputational ripple effects extend the consequences of exit far beyond the termination of the employment contract, underscoring that offboarding is not merely an administrative process but a critical determinant of an organization’s long-term reputational capital and employer attractiveness in the competitive labor market (Hom et al., 2017).

## **4. Consequences of the Employee Exit Experience**

The ramifications of the employee exit experience unfold across individual, organizational, and societal levels. At the individual level, exit experiences shape employees’ psychological well-being, post-exit identity formation, and career trajectories. Negative exit experiences, particularly those characterized by perceived injustice or psychological contract violation, can lead to rumination, decreased self-efficacy, and long-term distrust of organizations. Conversely, positive and affirming exit experiences serve as identity-enhancing transitions, reinforcing professional self-worth and facilitating smoother integration into subsequent work environments.

At the organizational level, the exit experience exerts substantial influence on culture, knowledge continuity, and employer brand reputation. Negative exits may trigger anxiety, decreased morale, and diminished organizational commitment (Brockner, 1992). Poorly managed exits disrupt knowledge transfer processes, reduce psychological safety, and diminish trust in leadership. Conversely, a respectful exit process strengthens perceptions of organizational justice and signals relational integrity to remaining employees, thereby supporting engagement and trust.

From a reputational standpoint, exit experiences increasingly manifest as externalized narratives that transcend organizational boundaries. With the growing normalization of online employer evaluation platforms and social media discourse, former employees have become significant contributors to organizational reputation ecosystems (Suen et al., 2020). Positive alumni relationships can yield strategic benefits such as talent referrals, customer loyalty, partnership opportunities, and boomerang hires (Dachner & Makarius, 2022). In contrast, negative exit-driven word of mouth can significantly damage employer attractiveness, deter high-quality job applicants, and compromise legitimacy in competitive labor markets (Stockman et al., 2020). Thus, the exit experience has evolved into a reputational asset or liability capable of influencing long-term organizational sustainability.

An employee's exit experience can influence the perceptions of current employees, customers, and prospective candidates who may join the organization in the future. When an employee leaves an organization—particularly one who is highly valued or has had a significant impact on the organization—their departure may affect the remaining workforce. Such exits can create a sense of loss or uncertainty among those who stay, potentially lowering employee morale and organizational commitment (Holtom et al., 2008; Hom et al., 2017).

Furthermore, departing employees' experiences can shape the perceptions of both remaining employees and potential applicants. A positive exit process may lead departing employees to recommend the organization as a favorable employer (Levashina et al., 2014), thereby strengthening employer branding and facilitating talent attraction (Hom et al., 2012). Similarly, managing the exit process fairly and respectfully may positively influence the morale and commitment of remaining employees. A positive exit experience can help preserve a constructive relationship between the employee and the organization, fostering positive word-of-mouth and contributing to future talent attraction (Akshatha & Ganesh, 2017).

However, a negative exit experience may harm corporate reputation. From an employer image perspective, negative exit experiences can have detrimental effects; former employees may share their unfavourable experiences with others, which can damage the organization's reputation and hinder its ability to attract and retain talent (Hom et al., 2017).

## 5. Discussion

Despite burgeoning scholarly attention, significant conceptual gaps persist in the literature on employee exit experiences. First, the construct remains insufficiently delineated, with terminological overlaps among "turnover experience," "offboarding," "exit management," and "employee exit narratives." Future research should strive to establish conceptual clarity by distinguishing exit as a multi-stage psychological and relational experience, rather than a transactional HR procedure.

Existing research is predominantly quantitative and attitudinal, focusing on predictors of turnover intention rather than lived exit experiences. There is a need for qualitative and longitudinal designs that capture narrative evolution, emotional processing, and meaning-making from pre-exit to post-exit phases. Such approaches would illuminate how exit stories are constructed, revised, and socially transmitted over time.

Also, empirical inquiry into voice–silence–exit dynamics remains limited. While Employee Voice Theory acknowledges the choice between voice and exit, little is known about how pre-exit silence shapes the emotional tone of the exit experience and subsequent reputational consequences. Future research should examine psychological safety, power asymmetries, and cultural norms that influence whether employees voice concerns before exiting.

Finally, cross-cultural research remains scarce. Norms governing conflict, voice, loyalty, and relational closure vary significantly across cultural contexts, suggesting that exit experiences may manifest differently in collectivist versus individualist societies. Comparative studies could provide deeper insight into contextual moderators of exit processes.

## 6. Conclusion

This review advances the conceptualization of the employee exit experience as a temporally extended, emotionally charged, and relationally consequential phenomenon that warrants multi-theoretical examination. Through integration of the Unfolding Model of Turnover, Psychological Contract Theory, Social Exchange Theory, Employee Voice Theory, and Affective Events Theory, the paper provides a comprehensive framework for understanding how exit experiences develop, are interpreted by employees, and exert lasting influence on individuals, organizations, and external stakeholders.

The exit experience transcends the administrative act of termination or resignation. It encompasses cognitive and emotional disengagement prior to separation, interactional and procedural elements during offboarding, and narrative construction and identity reconstruction after departure. As such, exit represents not an endpoint, but a continuity of the employment relationship, with enduring implications for organizational reputation and employee identity.

In contemporary labor markets marked by transparency, mobility, and heightened scrutiny of employers, exit experiences constitute a strategic domain of organizational practice. Firms that recognize exit as a relational and reputational event—rather than a bureaucratic transition—can leverage positive alumni networks, protect employer

brand equity, and cultivate a culture of dignity and fairness. Future research should continue to interrogate the nuanced psychological, relational, and reputational dynamics of exit to enrich theory and guide evidence-based organizational practice.

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