A Multilevel Analysis of Withdrawal Behaviors of Sport Management Interns at the end of their Tenure

Michael Odio, University of Florida
Matthew Walker (Advisor), University of Southern Mississippi

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According to Eagleman and McNary (2010), nearly 80% of sport management programs require students to complete a practical internship for graduation. Despite its importance to scholarly matriculation, little empirical attention has been focused on the stages of the sport management internship experience. Earlier works have discussed the educational value of sport internships (DeSensi, Kelley, Blanton, & Beitel, 1990) and the benefits reaped by organizations employing interns (Williams, 2004). Recent research has examined the pejorative effects of the internship in terms of the career choice (Cunningham, Sagas, Dixon, Kent & Turner, 2005) and the legal status of interns (Schoepfer & Dodds, 2010). In addition, Dixon, Cunningham, Sagas, Turner, and Kent (2005) examined the antecedents of the intern’s commitment to the internship site. This attitudinal focus provides insight that may influence the intern’s educational experience as well as their behavioral outcomes, which may (in turn) affect the internship site’s attitudes towards hiring interns. The present study seeks to illuminate this idea by examining how the attitudes of interns towards their internship site can influence their work behaviors. This purpose is accomplished by examining job attitudes and withdrawal behavior in the final three weeks the sport management internship.

Most research housed in the traditional management literature classifies turnover as voluntary or involuntary. However, the conclusion of an internship does not fall neatly under either category (Shaw, Delery, Jenkins, & Gupta, 1998; Ton & Huckman, 2008) and has not been investigated for any unique properties that might emerge during this phase. For example, previous literature has supported that withdrawal behavior is an antecedent of voluntary and involuntary turnover (Hanich and Hulin, 1990; Kammeyer-Mueller, Wanberg, Glomb, & Ahlgren, 2005) but no research has measured withdrawal behavior at the end of a fixed-term employment. This study takes the first step in filling this void by measuring the self-reported withdrawal behaviors of sport management interns over the last three weeks of their 16-week internship experience.

Participants were undergraduate sport management students at a large southeastern university completing their required internship for graduation. The data were collected using electronic questionnaires via e-mail for the last three weeks of the internship. To analyze the data, hierarchical linear modeling (HLM) was employed. A total of 113 students were solicited (i.e., all students working in the field for one semester), with the final sample being comprised of N=39, N=31 and N=30 for the three waves yielding a final aggregate response rate of 34.5%. The dependent variable of withdrawal behavior was measured in each of the last three weeks using a 16 item scale adapted from Hanich and Hulin (1990). Job attitudes, represented by job satisfaction and affective commitment, were included as level-2 independent variables measured only in the first wave of the data collection. Job satisfaction was measured using five items from Brayfield and Rothe (1951) and affective commitment was measured using six items from Meyer and Allen (1997). Perceived organizational support was also included as a level-2 independent variable measured with four items from Deconinck (2009), which was assessed in the first wave of data collection.

The hypotheses for this study were based on previous turnover literature linking other forms of turnover with withdrawal behavior (e.g., Hanich & Hulin, 1990; Kammeyer-Mueller, et al., 2005), job attitudes (e.g., Podsakoff, LePine, & LePine, 2007), and perceived organizational support (e.g., Eisenberger, Armeli, Rexwinkel, Lynch, & Rhoades, 2001) with withdrawal behaviors. In sum, time was hypothesized to be positively related to withdrawal behaviors increasing over the last three weeks. Job satisfaction, affective commitment and perceived organizational support were hypothesized to be negatively related to withdrawal behaviors at all three time points. Lastly, the three independent variables were hypothesized to have a negative cross-level interaction with time on withdrawal behavior.

Using a random ANOVA model with no predictors, the intra-class correlation coefficient (ICC) was calculated (.566) indicating that over 50% of the variance in withdrawal behavior was within-individuals rather than between
individuals, thereby supporting the use of HLM. Next, a random intercepts model was used to test for the time effect on withdrawal behaviors. The results showed a significant negative relationship between time and withdrawal behaviors ($\beta_{10} = -0.074, p = .02$), which is contrary to the first hypothesis. More interesting is that withdrawal behaviors did not decrease in a linear trend and the mean was nearly the same from week 1 to week 2 (2.6779 → 2.6794) but decreased between weeks 2 and 3 (2.6794 → 2.5208). One possible explanation is that this is the result of impression management (Wayne & Kacmar, 1988) of interns attempting to gain favorable assessments from their internship site supervisors in their last week. This result provides an important consideration for future research.

To test the effects of the three level-2 predictors and cross-level interactions, an intercepts and slopes as outcomes (ISAO) model was used. The results of the ISAO showed no significant effect on the intercept of withdrawal behaviors by any predictors, or for the slope by job satisfaction or perceived organizational support. However, there was a significant effect of affective commitment on the slope for withdrawal behavior ($\beta_{11} = 0.11, p = .05$). This result indicates the presence of a cross-level interaction between affective commitment and time on withdrawal behavior.

The cross-level interaction and estimated simple slopes suggest that interns who were below the mean on affective commitment (-0.16) reduced their withdrawal behaviors in the last week of their internship, whereas interns who were at (-0.08) or above (0.0047) the mean for affective commitment were constant on withdrawal behaviors across the final three weeks of their internships. Although further analysis is required to test these effects, it appears that sport management interns who are less emotionally attached to their internship sites may have a different set of behaviors and possibly engage in impression management in order to receive a positive evaluation at the conclusion of the experience. The results may have been confounded by the presence of the final internship evaluation. Nevertheless, this study draws a handful of points for future research. Although the ending of an internship does not fall under the established categories of voluntary or involuntary turnover, there may be a change in withdrawal behavior depending on other non-measured factors. Moreover, it is apparent that behavior may change as a result of the attitudes. Future research should attempt to explain this phenomena by expanding the number of time points included and examining interns who are not being evaluated at the conclusion of the internship.