

Retaining the learning professional: A survival study on workplace learning in professional service firms

Therese Grohnert (Maastricht University)

2 November 2021

Lowering professional turnover is of paramount importance for professional service firms, as with each professional, crucial proprietary knowledge leaves the firm. Based on the need to retain this crucial knowledge in the firm, this study explores whether factors that drive learning at work also mitigate professionals' turnover behavior. Building on insights from both workplace learning and turnover research, this study follows 96 professional auditors across a period of 5 years to determine how drivers for workplace learning at the organizational, the social interaction, and the individual level relate to turnover behavior. Through survival analysis, we find that those auditors who experience a supportive learning climate at the organizational level were less likely to leave their firm and profession, while those who score high on individual-level reflection were more likely to leave their firm and profession. We also found that professionals scoring high on reflection leave more quickly when they perceive to work in an unsupportive learning climate— when they experience low synergy across workplace learning levels. Especially observable behaviors, such as providing help and feedback, discussing errors, and building trust, made a significant difference. This study adds to extant research in three principal ways: exploring actual turnover behavior, approaching turnover behavior through a lens of workplace learning, and analyzing interactions between individual-, social- and organizational-level learning. The findings of this study lead to specific insights for HRD practice.