

# IMPACT BRIEF

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## It's a Paradox: Union Workers Less Satisfied but Less Likely to Quit

**Research question:** The academic literature offers a variety of explanations for why union workers are less satisfied with their jobs than their non-union counterparts but are also less likely to quit. What is the bottom-line answer to this paradox?

**Conclusion:** Existing economic models of human behavior do not adequately deal with the seeming inconsistency between union members' attitudes about their jobs and their subsequent actions. A more promising explanation might derive from job satisfaction theory, which suggests that union members have a particular set of values, expectations, and frames of reference that they use to evaluate the outcomes of their work effort. Individuals who join unions may place higher value on wages and benefits, which are the focus of most collectively-bargained contracts, than do non-union workers; historically, unions have delivered in this regard. Unionized workers may be more dissatisfied because of a more adversarial climate (e.g., testy supervisory and interpersonal relations, narrowly-defined jobs) but are less likely to quit because the things they value most—good wages and benefits—are provided.

**Workplace impact:** Job satisfaction among union workers could be enhanced if the quality of jobs increased (e.g., greater scope of work, more discretion, more promotion opportunities) and the labor-manage-

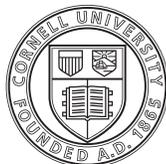
ment climate improved. These outcomes could be accomplished if union and management functioned more as partners and if work were redesigned to be more intrinsically interesting. Given the positive relationship that researchers have often found between job satisfaction and job performance, productivity might improve if employers (and the union, where appropriate) adopted policies and practices that had the effect of boosting job satisfaction. Even in the presence of worker dissatisfaction, unions have a positive effect on retention by limiting voluntary turnover, which is costly to employers.

**Abstract:** Membership in a union comes with costs as well as benefits. Union members pay dues, risk lost income from potential strikes, and experience less demand for their higher-priced labor. On the other hand, wages and benefits for union workers generally exceed those for non-union peers. Given the rewards of membership, a casual observer might expect union workers to be well satisfied with their jobs. And yet, they have lower quit rates despite surveys showing they are less content than non-members.

One obstacle to understanding the dissatisfaction-turnover-union conundrum is methodological problems with the data and the explanatory models. The large national probability samples traditionally used to examine the relationship between job satisfaction and turnover fail to distinguish among the effects produced by union membership and the way working conditions/workplace climate influence job satisfaction and/or the decision to unionize. Measures of job satisfaction in

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Cornell University  
ILR School

most surveys are both too few and too general, and research on organizational commitment rarely considers the role played by union status.

The exit-voice hypothesis, first applied to a union setting by Richard Freeman and James Medoff in 1984, suggests that instead of quitting, union members assuage whatever dissatisfaction they feel through established “voice” mechanisms (grieving contract infractions, for example, or sounding off at union meetings). Despite the obvious pecuniary gains of membership, they speculate that union workers’ dissatisfaction reflects the unpleasant aspects of their jobs (e.g., the quality of supervision and the nature of job tasks) that prompted them to unionize in the first place. As union members, they are further primed to detect unsatisfactory job characteristics due to politicization. Therefore, Freeman and Medoff argue, union members’ expressed dissatisfaction is manufactured and not indicative of their true attitudes. Other researchers have posited additional explanations for lower rates of job satisfaction among union members, such as supervisory and institutional structures that are inherently adversarial, and narrowly-defined job tasks and rigid work rules that limit workers’ full use of their abilities.

Studies of the exit-voice hypothesis show mixed results. Some find moderate support for the model regarding lower turnover rates among union members, particularly in the presence of a strong grievance procedure. Others find no significant interaction among job satisfaction, job tenure, and union membership.

These findings have led some researchers to consider other explanations for why union members remain wedded to the job despite their dissatisfaction. Some

argue that job satisfaction theory, which looks at the internal frames of reference workers use to evaluate job outcomes, provides a more convincing model. In this conceptualization, some people seek out and stick with union jobs because they value the outcomes generated by collective bargaining—higher wages and better benefits—more than other outcomes or workplace environmental factors. Others suggest that unhappy workers mitigate their dissatisfaction by certain adaptive behaviors, such as tardiness or absenteeism, at least in part because the psychological costs of quitting are too high (i.e., walking away from a tight network of interpersonal relationships or an investment in workplace-specific skills is scary).

Regardless which explanation for the attitude-behavior paradox prevails, the issue of union workers’ job dissatisfaction remains a nagging concern.

**Methodology:** The authors undertook a comprehensive review of the major journal articles on union satisfaction and union turnover and then drew their own conclusions from among the many offered by the literature.

**Source publication:** “The Impact of Unions on Job Satisfaction, Organizational Commitment, and Turnover” appeared in the *Journal of Labor Research*, 26, 2; Spring 2005 and as a chapter in James T. Bennett and Bruce E. Kaufman (Eds.), *What Do Unions Do? A Twenty-Year Perspective*; 2007; New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers.

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by TOVE HELLAND HAMMER  
Professor of Organizational Behavior (ILR)

ARIEL AVGAR  
ILR School



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