

Retention of Early-Career Federal Employees: The Role of Organizational Support and Satisfaction

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High turnover among early-career federal employees threatens workforce stability and public service delivery. We used data from the 2023 Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey ($N = 625,568$) to examine how perceived organizational support and employee satisfaction related to turnover intention, with a focus on employees under age 40. Structural equation modeling revealed a strong positive relationship between perceived organizational support and employee satisfaction ($\beta = .97$), and a negative relationship between employee satisfaction and turnover intention ($\beta = -.83$). These relationships emerged more strongly among employees under age 40 than among older employees. Supplementary analyses showed that employee satisfaction was most strongly associated with lower intentions to leave federal service for nonfederal employment. In contrast, when perceived organizational support was not accompanied by employee satisfaction, analyses revealed higher turnover intention, suggesting a perceived employability effect as a plausible interpretation. Overall, our findings highlight employee satisfaction as a central intervening variable in the association between organizational support and turnover intention and suggest that support initiatives showed stronger associations with retention attitudes when experienced as satisfying in employees' day-to-day work experiences.

INTRODUCTION

Employee turnover presents a persistent challenge for organizations, but its consequences are especially pronounced in large public-sector systems where continuity, institutional knowledge, and mission execution depend on workforce stability. Within the United States federal government, early-career employees leave at higher rates than their older counterparts, creating recurring cycles of recruitment, onboarding, and lost expertise that strain organizational capacity and public service delivery (Abner, 2023; Hur & Abner, 2023; Partnership for Public Service, n.d.). Although some turnover is expected, a substantial portion—particularly among younger employees—is avoidable and costly.

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Understanding why early-career federal employees consider leaving requires attention beyond compensation or labor market competition. Federal employment offers relative job security and opportunities for meaningful public service, yet younger employees frequently report dissatisfaction related to workload, development opportunities, leadership support, and work–life balance (Lavigna, 2021). These experiences are associated with whether employees remain in their roles, and whether they envision a long-term future within public service. In contemporary work environments characterized by technological change, remote work, and evolving expectations regarding connection and development, early employment experiences may carry heightened importance for newcomer adaptability and long-term attachment (Bauer et al., 2025). Identifying organizational conditions that predict satisfaction and retention among early-career employees therefore represents a critical applied concern for organizational leaders and policymakers.

Perceived organizational support (POS) provides a useful framework for examining these dynamics. POS reflects employees' beliefs about the extent to which their organization values their contributions and cares about their well-being (Eisenberger et al., 1986). Although prior research links POS to job satisfaction and TI across organizational settings (Eisenberger et al., 2020; Kurtessis et al., 2017), comparatively less research has examined these relationships within the U.S. federal workforce. Existing federal studies demonstrate that organizational and supervisory support are associated with employee engagement and related attitudes (Lee & Shin, 2023), but fewer studies have examined how satisfaction functions as an intervening variable linking support to turnover intention across career stages.

The public-sector context introduces additional complexity to the support–retention relationship. Federal agencies operate within bureaucratic structures that constrain pay flexibility, promotion speed, and managerial discretion, potentially increasing the salience of non-monetary support signals such as recognition, feedback, and development opportunities (Zubair et al., 2021). At the same time, organizational support may serve multiple psychological functions: while support can enhance satisfaction and attachment, it may also increase employees' confidence in their skills and perceived employability. For early-career employees—who are actively forming professional identities and evaluating long-term career fit—these dynamics may meaningfully influence TI.

Employee satisfaction (ES) represents a central intervening variable through which organizational support is associated with turnover-related outcomes. Classic and contemporary turnover models identify satisfaction as a proximal predictor of withdrawal cognitions and intent to leave (Mobley, 1977; Price, 1977). Consistent with the Job Demands–Resources framework, organizational resources such as support and autonomy shape employee attitudes before influencing behavioral intentions (Bakker et al., 2003; Demerouti et al., 2001). Prior research supports this mediating pathway across sectors (Jing & Yan, 2022; Pu et al., 2024; Sartori et al., 2023), but limited work has tested it within the federal workforce using analytic approaches that account for measurement error and complex relationships among latent constructs.

This study examines how POS relates to ES and TI among U.S. federal employees, with particular attention to age-based differences. Using data from the 2023 Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey (FEVS; $N = 625,568$), we applied structural equation modeling to test whether ES mediated the relationship between POS and TI and whether this process differed for employees under age 40 compared to those aged 40 and older.

Focusing on employees under age 40 is especially salient in the federal context, as voluntary turnover—not retirement—accounts for most separations among younger employees (Partnership for Public Service, n.d.). This distinction underscores the importance of examining organizational conditions that are associated with discretionary turnover decisions rather than age-normative career transitions. Understanding how early-career employees experience organizational support can inform targeted strategies aimed at stabilizing the federal talent pipeline.

The present study contributes to applied psychological research by extending organizational support research into a large public-sector workforce using rigorous analytic methods designed to better account for measurement error and competing model specifications. It clarifies the role of ES as a key intervening variable linking support to TI and offers actionable insights for organizational leaders seeking to reduce avoidable attrition in complex, real-world settings.

Theory and Hypotheses

POS in the federal workforce reflects employees' beliefs about the extent to which their organization values their contributions and cares about their well-being (Eisenberger et al., 1986). Organizational Support Theory (OST) proposes that employees develop global perceptions of support through repeated interactions with supervisors, organizational policies, and workplace practices, and that these perceptions are associated with work-related attitudes and behavioral intentions over time (Eisenberger et al., 2020). When employees perceive high levels of support, they are more likely to reciprocate with positive attitudes, stronger attachment to the organization, and reduced withdrawal cognitions.

Research across organizational contexts consistently links POS to favorable outcomes, including job satisfaction, affective commitment, and lower TI (Kurtessis et al., 2017). These relationships appear robust across industries and national settings, suggesting that organizational support appears to function as a foundational psychological resource rather than a context-specific benefit. However, comparatively little research has examined how POS operates within the U.S. federal workforce, where structural constraints such as limited pay flexibility, formalized advancement systems, and bureaucratic decision-making may shape how support signals are interpreted (Zubair et al., 2021). In such contexts, non-monetary indicators of support—such as recognition, feedback, and opportunities for development—may carry heightened importance, particularly for employees in the early stages of their careers.

ES as an intervening variable represents an overall evaluative judgment of one's job and work experience and serves as a central attitudinal predictor of turnover-related outcomes. Classic turnover models identify satisfaction as a proximal antecedent to withdrawal cognitions and intent to leave (Mobley, 1977; Price, 1977). More recent research

continues to demonstrate that satisfaction explains how workplace conditions translate into TI across organizational settings (Jing & Yan, 2022; Pu et al., 2024).

Both OST and the Job Demands–Resources framework suggest that organizational resources are theoretically proposed to influence behavioral intentions indirectly through employee attitudes (Bakker et al., 2003; Demerouti et al., 2001; Eisenberger et al., 2020). Organizational support is theorized to provide socioemotional resources associated with needs for recognition, belonging, and security, and may be positively linked to satisfaction. Higher satisfaction is consistently associated with lower likelihood of considering departure. Empirical evidence supports this intervening pathway, with studies demonstrating that satisfaction-related constructs explain the relationship between organizational support and TI (Sartori et al., 2023). Within the federal workforce, where intrinsic motivation often coexists with structural constraints, satisfaction may play a particularly important role in shaping discretionary turnover decisions.

Age differences in support and satisfaction represent important contextual factors in how employees interpret organizational experiences. Early-career employees tend to place greater emphasis on feedback, development opportunities, leadership engagement, and work–life balance when evaluating their employment relationship (Charoensap-Kelly et al., 2023). Socialization research further suggests that how newcomers are integrated—through organizational tactics and proactive engagement—shapes both what they learn and how they adjust to the organization (Ashforth et al., 2007). These dynamics align closely with core elements of organizational support, suggesting that younger employees may be especially responsive to support signals.

Within the federal workforce, age also corresponds to distinct turnover patterns. Younger employees are more likely to leave voluntarily, whereas older employees primarily exit through retirement (Partnership for Public Service, n.d.). This distinction indicates that organizational conditions such as support and satisfaction may exert stronger influence on discretionary TI among early-career employees than among their older counterparts. Because early-career employees are actively forming professional identities and assessing long-term fit, organizational support may carry greater informational value for this group, signaling investment, opportunity, and alignment with employee values.

Based on this theoretical foundation, we propose the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1: POS is positively associated with ES among federal employees under age 40.

Hypothesis 2: ES is negatively associated with TI among federal employees under age 40.

Hypothesis 3: ES mediates the relationship between POS and TI among federal employees under age 40.

Hypothesis 4: The positive relationship between POS and ES is stronger among federal employees under age 40 than among those aged 40 and older.

METHOD

Data were drawn from the 2023 Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey (FEVS), administered by the U.S. Office of Personnel Management (OPM) to federal civilian employees across executive branch agencies. The FEVS uses a cross-sectional design; detailed information on sampling procedures, survey administration, and item construction is available in the official technical report (OPM, 2025). The survey provides a nationally representative snapshot of federal employees' perceptions, workplace experiences, and demographic characteristics across agencies and occupations.

The analytic sample included 625,568 employees from all executive branch agencies. Consistent with federal workforce planning priorities and FEVS reporting conventions, analyses distinguished between employees under age 40 and those aged 40 and older. Age was operationalized to reflect early-career status rather than generational identity. Employees under age 40 were more likely to report turnover intention, particularly intentions to leave federal service for nonfederal employment. Descriptive statistics for the sample are presented in Table 1.

Table 1 Demographic Characteristics for Sample

	Variable	<i>n</i>	%
Sex			
	Male	291129	46.5
	Female	268776	43.0
	<Missing data>	65663	10.5
Age			
	Under 40	139439	22.3
	40 or older	422557	67.5
	<Missing data>	63572	10.2
Turnover Intention			
	Staying	387075	61.9
	Leaving-Other	68027	10.9
	Leaving-Internal Fed Gov	106206	17.0
	Leaving-External Fed Gov	23615	3.7
	<Missing data>	40645	6.5
Racial Category			
	Black or African American	79671	12.7
	White	375002	59.9
	Asian	32025	5.1
	Other*	40316	6.5
	<Missing data>	98554	15.8
Cultural Origin			
	Hispanic/Latinx	61374	9.8
	Not of Hispanic/Latinx	493130	78.8
	<Missing data>	64517	10.3
Disability			
	Yes	92065	14.7
	No	468986	75.0
	<Missing data>	64517	10.3
Supervisor Status			

Federal Tenure	Non-Supervisor/Team Leader	456891	73.0
	Supervisor/Manager/Executive	127624	20.4
	<Missing data>	41053	6.6
	Ten years or fewer	239591	38.3
	Eleven to 20 years	197649	31.6
	More than 20 years	145913	23.3
	<Missing data>	42415	6.8
	Military Status		
	Military Service	151847	24.3
Military Status	No prior military service	431921	69.0
	<Missing data>	41800	6.7

Note. *N* = 625568. *Other groups collapsed for privacy.

The model specified two latent constructs—POS and ES—each measured using multiple FEVS items (see Table 2). TI was modeled as a single-indicator outcome variable. We first conducted confirmatory factor analysis to evaluate the measurement model using theory-driven item assignments. Model respecification, when necessary, was guided by standardized residuals and modification indices, but only when changes were theoretically defensible (e.g., similarly worded or conceptually overlapping items). After establishing acceptable measurement properties, we estimated the structural model to test direct and indirect effects.

We estimated models using the full sample and tested age-based moderation through multiple-group SEM. Specifically, we compared path coefficients between employees under age 40 and those aged 40 and older to assess differences in the strength of the POS–ES relationship.

Table 2 2023 FEVS Items Used to Measure Perceived Organizational Support and Employee Satisfaction Latent Variables

2023 FEVS Question	POS	ES
Q1. I am given a real opportunity to improve my skills in my organization.	X	
Q2. I feel encouraged to come up with new and better ways of doing things.	X	
Q6. My talents are used well in the workplace.	X	
Q9. I have enough information to do my job well.	X	
Q10. I receive the training I need to do my job well.	X	
Q12. I have a clear idea of how well I am doing my job.	X	
Q13. I have the autonomy to decide how I do my job.	X	
Q25. I can influence decisions in my work unit.	X	
Q40. Information is openly shared in my organization.	X	
Q46. I recommend my organization as a good place to work.		X
Q67. How satisfied are you with your involvement in decisions that affect your work?		X
Q69. How satisfied are you with the recognition you receive for doing a good job?		X
Q70. Considering everything, how satisfied are you with your job?		X
Q71. Considering everything, how satisfied are you with your pay?		X

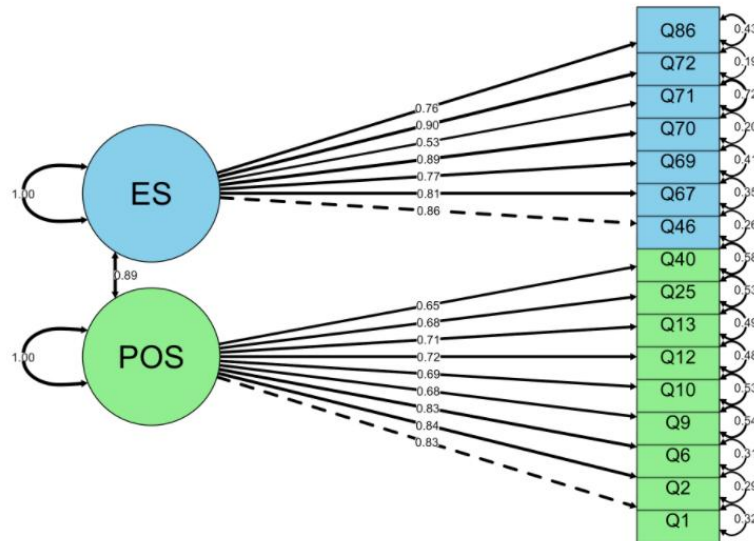
Q72. Considering everything, how satisfied are you with your organization?	X
Q86. My job inspires me.	X

Note. POS = Perceived Organizational Support; ES = Employee Satisfaction.

SEM was selected over ordinary least squares (OLS) regression for three methodological reasons. First, POS and ES are latent constructs measured by multiple indicators; SEM partitions systematic construct variance from item-level measurement error directly within the model, whereas OLS regression requires forming composite scores that assume measurement error is zero. Second, the primary research questions concerned indirect effects—specifically, whether ES mediated the relationship between POS and TI—a pathway that SEM estimates with greater precision and appropriate standard errors than product-of-coefficients approaches applied to observed composites. Third, testing age-based moderation required comparing structural paths across groups simultaneously, which SEM accommodates through formal invariance constraints; this approach provides a more rigorous test of differential effects than moderated regression with observed variables. Robust maximum likelihood estimation (MLR) was used throughout to account for non-normality and the large sample size.

Figure 1 presents the structural model with latent constructs and hypothesized paths. We addressed missing data using multiple imputation. Multigroup SEM was used to compare structural path coefficients across age groups; model estimation was conducted simultaneously across groups to ensure construct specification was held constant. In addition to SEM analyses, we conducted a supplementary multinomial logistic regression to examine TI by exit pathway, including intentions to leave federal service for nonfederal employment and intentions to transfer internally within the federal government. These supplementary analyses were exploratory and intended to provide additional applied insight rather than to test formal hypotheses.

Figure 1 Model Structure of Measurement Model



RESULTS

We conducted confirmatory factor analysis to evaluate the measurement model for POS and ES. The initial model demonstrated moderate fit (CFI = .858, TLI = .840, RMSEA = .112, SRMR = .050). Given the large sample size, emphasis was placed on practical fit indices (CFI, TLI, SRMR) rather than chi-square significance. Inspection of standardized residuals and modification indices suggested localized areas of strain among similarly worded or conceptually overlapping items. Consistent with prior FEVS modeling approaches (Fernandez et al., 2015; Somers, 2018), we permitted a small number of correlated residuals among these item pairs and removed redundant indicators that showed substantial conceptual overlap. No cross-factor loadings were introduced, and all retained indicators loaded on their originally specified latent constructs. These refinements improved model fit (CFI = .946, TLI = .936, RMSEA = .078, SRMR = .033).

Hypothesis Testing

Hypothesis 1 proposed that POS would be positively associated with ES among federal employees under age 40. SEM supported this hypothesis, revealing a strong positive relationship between POS and ES for younger employees ($\beta = .97$, $SE = .002$, $p < .001$). Given conceptual overlap between organizational support and satisfaction constructs in large organizational surveys, high covariance was anticipated; however, the constructs remained empirically distinguishable in the measurement model as evidenced by clean factor structure, though full discriminant validity by the Fornell-Larcker criterion was not established, as discussed in the Limitations section.

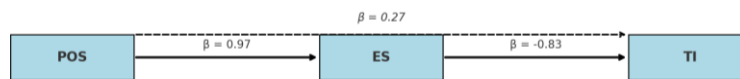
Hypothesis 2 posited a negative association between ES and TI among employees under age 40. This hypothesis was also supported; higher ES was associated with substantially lower TI ($\beta = -.83$, $SE = .005$, $p < .001$).

Hypothesis 3 examined whether ES mediated the relationship between POS and TI. Results indicated a significant indirect effect of POS on TI

through ES ($\beta = -.80$, $SE = .005$, $p < .001$). After accounting for ES, the direct effect of POS on TI was positive ($\beta = .27$, $SE = .005$, $p < .001$), an unanticipated pattern consistent with statistical suppression. Despite this reversal, the total effect of POS on TI remained negative ($\beta = -.53$, $SE = .007$, $p < .001$). This reversal prompted further examination of a potential perceived employability interpretation. Figure 2 presents the full structural model.

Hypothesis 4 tested whether age moderated the POS–ES relationship. Multigroup structural equation modeling indicated that this association was significantly stronger for employees under age 40 ($\beta = .98$, $SE = .004$, $p < .001$) than for employees aged 40 and older ($\beta = .95$, $SE = .002$, $p < .001$), $Z = 6.85$, $p < .001$. Although statistically significant, the magnitude of the difference was modest, indicating that POS is strongly associated with ES across career stages, with early-career employees showing somewhat greater responsiveness rather than a qualitatively distinct pattern.

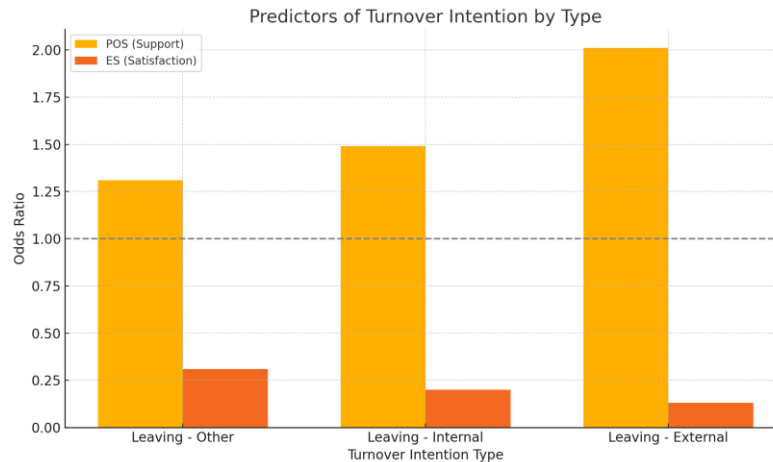
Figure 2 Model Structure



All paths statistically significant ($p < .001$).
Dashed arrow shows direct effect after accounting for ES (mediation).

To further examine TI by exit pathway, we conducted a supplementary multinomial logistic regression. ES emerged as the strongest negative predictor of intentions to leave federal service for nonfederal employment ($OR = .13$, $p < .001$), followed by internal federal transfers ($OR = .20$, $p < .001$) and other departure reasons ($OR = .31$, $p < .001$). In contrast, after controlling for ES, POS was associated with increased odds of all types of TI, with the strongest effect observed for nonfederal exits ($OR = 2.01$, $p < .001$). Figure 3 displays estimated odds ratios by exit pathway. These findings should be interpreted as exploratory and hypothesis-generating rather than confirmatory.

Figure 3 Predictors of Turnover by Type



Given the cross-sectional design, all findings are interpreted as associations rather than causal effects, and directional language in the discussion reflects theoretical propositions rather than established causal claims.

DISCUSSION

Taken together, the findings clarify how organizational support and satisfaction are jointly associated with turnover intention in the U.S. federal workforce. Using data from more than 625,000 federal employees, the analyses show that POS was strongly associated with ES, which was in turn associated with substantially lower TI. Although not hypothesized, the positive direct path from POS to TI after accounting for satisfaction suggests a potential employability-signaling dynamic as one plausible interpretation. Organizational support may be associated with greater confidence in skills and marketability, which, in the absence of satisfaction, could correlate with openness to external opportunities. This interpretation is consistent with research on human capital signaling and boundaryless careers, but future research is needed to directly test this mechanism.

The results highlight employee satisfaction as the central intervening variable through which organizational support is associated with retention-related outcomes. Although prior research has documented associations among POS, ES, and TI, the present findings suggest that POS alone showed limited association with lower turnover intention in the absence of employee satisfaction. In bureaucratic settings such as federal agencies, formal expressions of support may not consistently align with employees' lived experiences, making satisfaction a critical differentiator between symbolic support and substantively felt support.

The stronger POS–ES relationship observed among employees under age 40 further underscores the importance of career stage. Early-career federal employees appear particularly sensitive to how support is enacted and interpreted, likely because support may be interpreted as signaling investment, opportunity, and long-term organizational commitment. For

this group, satisfaction functions as both an evaluative judgment of current work conditions and a cue for future fit within public service.

Practical Implications

From an applied perspective, the findings suggest that organizational support initiatives may be most strongly associated with retention outcomes when employees also report higher satisfaction rather than merely signal organizational concern—though causal direction cannot be established from the present data. Practices such as meaningful recognition, timely feedback, manageable workloads, and access to development opportunities appear especially salient for early-career employees. In the absence of these experiences, support was not associated with lower turnover intention and showed a positive association with external exit intentions.

Supervisors play a critical role in translating organizational support into satisfying work experiences, as they often serve as the primary conduit through which employees experience support. Supervisory practices associated with consistent feedback, recognizing contributions, and supporting work–life balance were linked to higher satisfaction in this sample, suggesting potential value in prioritizing these satisfaction-enhancing practices as a central retention lever—though experimental or longitudinal evidence would be needed to confirm retention effects.

Limitations of the Study

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting these findings. The use of cross-sectional FEVS data limits causal inference in several important respects. First, the design precludes establishing temporal ordering among POS, ES, and TI; longitudinal data would be necessary to confirm that organizational support precedes satisfaction, which in turn precedes withdrawal cognitions, as the theoretical model implies. Second, reverse causation cannot be ruled out—employees with lower turnover intention may report higher POS and ES due to motivated reasoning or identity-consistent responding, rather than support and satisfaction independently driving retention attitudes. Third, the concurrent measurement of all constructs introduces the possibility of unmeasured third-variable confounding; agency-level culture, occupational role, or mission salience may simultaneously shape POS, ES, and TI in ways the present design cannot isolate. Finally, because POS is measured at the same time point as ES and TI, endogeneity remains a concern—satisfaction may influence how employees perceive and report organizational support, rather than the reverse. Organizational Support Theory provides a theoretically grounded basis for treating POS as antecedent to satisfaction (Eisenberger et al., 2020), but the cross-sectional design cannot adjudicate between competing causal orderings. Future research employing longitudinal FEVS waves, administrative linkage to actual turnover records, or quasi-experimental designs leveraging agency-level policy variation would offer stronger grounds for causal interpretation.

Beyond causal inference concerns, POS, ES, and TI were derived from items not originally designed as standalone scales. Although psychometric analyses supported construct validity, purpose-built measures could

improve precision. A related psychometric limitation concerns the degree of construct overlap between POS and ES in the present measurement model. Although confirmatory factor analysis supported a two-factor structure with all indicators loading significantly on their hypothesized constructs, average variance extracted (AVE) for both POS (.548) and ES (.636) fell below the squared inter-construct correlation (.796), indicating that the Fornell-Larcker criterion for discriminant validity was not met (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). This pattern is consistent with the high standardized path coefficient observed between POS and ES ($\beta = .97$) and reflects a known limitation of secondary survey data not designed to operationalize theoretically distinct constructs. The FEVS items used to approximate POS and ES capture related facets of the employee experience—support, development opportunity, recognition, and satisfaction—which share substantial conceptual terrain. Composite reliability was strong for both constructs ($\omega = .926$ for POS; $\omega = .929$ for ES), indicating that each scale measured its intended domain consistently; however, the construct overlap limits the precision with which POS and ES can be treated as fully independent latent variables. Future research should employ purpose-built measures administered under conditions that reduce shared method variance to more rigorously test the independence of these constructs.

The single-item measure of TI may underrepresent the complexity of turnover decision-making, and the binary age grouping (<40 vs. ≥ 40) simplifies career-stage dynamics. Lastly, model modifications were guided by theoretical rationale and prior FEVS research; however, the large sample size may have amplified sensitivity to minor misspecifications, and cross-validation in future samples would strengthen confidence in model specification.

Recommendations for Future Research

Future research could address these limitations by using longitudinal FEVS waves or linking survey data to administrative turnover records. Qualitative or mixed-methods approaches may deepen understanding of how employees interpret organizational support and which practices they find most meaningful. Additionally, examining variations across agencies, missions, or occupational roles could clarify contextual differences in support climates. Comparative studies across public, private, and nonprofit sectors may further illuminate which support mechanisms may be context-specific and which may generalize across settings.

Conclusion

This study examined how perceived organizational support and employee satisfaction were jointly associated with turnover intention in the U.S. federal workforce, with particularly strong associations observed among early-career employees. While POS was strongly associated with higher satisfaction and lower turnover intention overall, the findings also indicate that support was associated with increased perceived mobility when not accompanied by higher satisfying work experiences. Organizational support thus appears to relate to turnover like a double-edged construct—strengthening retention when paired with satisfaction but potentially encouraging external movement when it is not.

For federal agencies seeking to retain the next generation of public servants, these findings suggest that support that is experienced as meaningful in daily work was more strongly associated with retention attitudes than support that may be more symbolic or structural. This is a pattern that warrants further investigation with longitudinal designs before informing causal recommendations.

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