

Never Fear, Hope is Here: A Quantitative Analysis of Public Accountants' Hope During Busy Season

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Justification of Research Design

Retaining public accountants has been a known struggle for many years due to the strenuous nature of the profession (Chong & Monroe, 2013; Herda & Lavelle, 2012). Recently, this struggle has transformed into the resignation problem that public accounting firms are currently facing. Around 17% of accountants and auditors have left public accounting firms over the past two years, and the number of accounting graduates has dropped by 9% over the past decade (Ellis, 2022; Estrada, 2022; Howard, 2023; Lopatto, 2022). These statistics highlight the importance of understanding what drives public accountants to stay in public accounting. Accounting literature has focused on the negative aspects or adverse outcomes of busy season, but we also need to fully understand the factors that support retention within the public accounting field. I propose that a public accountant's hope surrounding busy season impacts how they appraise stress, which indirectly influences their well-being, turnover intentions, and burnout.

Literature and Theoretical Foundation

Hope is defined as the "perceived capability to derive pathways to desired goals and motivate oneself via agency thinking to use those pathways" (Snyder, 2002, p. 249). Snyder's definition of hope indicates that a person must have a goal, a way to achieve their goal—pathway—and motivation to achieve their goal—agency. Hope has been shown to predict employee well-being and work performance (Reichard et al., 2013); job satisfaction and organizational commitment (Youssef & Luthans, 2007); and intentions to quit and job search behaviors (Avey et al., 2009). Research has indicated that individuals with high levels of hope are more likely to assess issues or stressors that may arise in the goal pursuit as challenges rather than hindrances (Avey et al., 2009; Chernyak-Hai et al., 2023; Snyder et al., 1991). Stressors are viewed as challenges when individuals determine that the stressors motivate them to achieve their ultimate goals and hindrances when the individual deems the stressor as debilitating. Based on Hobfoll's (1989) Conservation of Resources (COR) theory, stress occurs

from a loss of resources and personal appraisals of resources, such as hope. Since hope is considered a personal resource, people may lose hope in pursuing their goals, which impacts how they appraise stressors (Karatepe, 2014; Reis & Hoppe, 2014; Ozyilmaz, 2019). My proposed model adopts the COR theory by including both challenge and hindrance appraisals.

Turnover intentions, which is commonly associated with retention, poor employee well-being, and burnout have previously been identified as adverse outcomes of public accounting (Kohlmeyer et al., 2017; Nouri & Parker, 2020; Smith et al., 2020). Prior research indicates that burnout is positively related to turnover intentions within public accounting firms (Cordes & Dougherty, 1993; Herda & Lavelle, 2012; Nouri & Parker, 2020; Smith et al., 2020); and burnout is negatively related to employee well-being in the accounting field (Çollaku et al., 2023).

Research Question, Aim, and Objectives

My study asks the question “Does a public accountant’s hope before busy season impact their likelihood to leave the firm and their behavior by the end of busy season?” The proposed study aims to determine whether a public accountant’s hope dictates how they appraise stress during busy season, which may ultimately affect their well-being, turnover intentions, and burnout.

Proposed Methodology

To qualify for the study, the participants must currently be public accountants working in a public accounting firm. I intend to recruit these participants by contacting professionals in public accounting firms and state accounting societies within the United States. Using Qualtrics, I will survey participants at two different points in time. At Time 1 (before busy season), participants would provide demographic information and complete a survey evaluating their state hope level. Busy season, which spans from January 1st to April 15th, is considered the months leading up to the deadline to file individual and businesses’ annual tax return and to file the annual audited financial statements. At Time 2 (after busy season), participants would complete a survey that evaluates their appraised job stressors and the

outcome variables. I will examine the correlation of the variables of interest to determine whether the relationship between the variables is consistent with prior literature. I will use regression analysis with the PROCESS macro (Hayes, 2022) to better understand the possible mediator/moderator relationships between hope and the outcomes via the appraised job stressors (i.e., challenge appraisal and hindrance appraisal).

Philosophical Perspective

From a positivist perspective, I intend to quantitatively examine a public accountant's hope during busy season and how hope can impact stress.

Intended Contributions to Theory and Practice

This examination could shed light on how positive attributes impact retention within the public accounting field. Potentially, practitioners could benefit from understanding the importance of hopefulness during busy season and its impact on retention. Public accounting firms may consider ways to motivate employees during busy seasons to help facilitate the public accountant's hope, which may ultimately lead to better retention. There is an abundance of literature concerning the adverse outcomes of busy season and the negative aspects that lead to those outcomes (Kohlmeyer et al., 2017; Nouri & Parker, 2020; Smith et al., 2020). However, there is a lack of research regarding the causes of favorable outcomes within public accounting. The proposed model may contribute to theory in a number of ways. First, hope has received little attention in behavioral accounting research, so this study will broaden the accounting literature to include positive organizational behaviors that may impact intentions to remain in public accounting. Second, I will extend the COR theory by applying the hope variable as a predictor for stress appraisals. With the decline in retention and recruitment within public accounting, we must investigate why public accountants stay with a firm, eventually leveraging those findings into methods of increasing retention.

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