The decision to voluntarily quit or remain in a job is one that employees make on a regular basis. The decision process can range from a job-related event that causes an individual to resign immediately to one that is agonized about for several years; in limited cases it can be an impulsive act. Within a turnover decision framework, individuals engage in the cognitive process of thinking about quitting which may or may not translate into quitting; it may also translate into alternative forms of withdrawal (see Mobley, 1977, and Hanisch, 1995a). What occurs between the time individuals think about quitting until their resignation date? Do individuals who think about quitting for long periods of time prior to quitting have different attitudes and engage in different behaviors than those employees who think about quitting and then shortly thereafter resign? Are those individuals with a longer period of time between thinking about quitting and quitting more disruptive to an organization than those with a shorter time between their thoughts of quitting and resignation? This research evaluated whether the decision lag was related to behaviors employees engage in prior to exiting. It also examined how the timing of the first thoughts of quitting relates to employees’ attitudes in an organization prior to resignation.
Mobley (1977) described and charted the employee turnover process arguing from Porter and Steers (1973) that we need to understand the process of withdrawal and how the decision to terminate is made. The intermediate steps as presented by Mobley (1977) include the following: evaluation of existing job, experienced job satisfaction/dissatisfaction, thinking of quitting, evaluation of expected utility of search and cost of quitting, intention to search for alternatives, search for alternatives, evaluation of alternatives, comparison of alternatives versus present job, intention to quit/stay and quit/stay. There are myriad feedback loops throughout the process and Mobley (1977) suggests that in addition to quitting employees might select other forms of withdrawal in an effort to deal with or manage their dissatisfaction. He suggests that research is needed on how the expression of withdrawal behavior changes as a function of time and of changes in or reevaluation of the environment.

Research has supported a heuristic model based on Mobley’s (1977) turnover model (e.g., Mobley, Horner, & Hollingsworth, 1978). The heuristic model posits that thinking of quitting is the most probable outcome of job dissatisfaction. Mobley et al. (1978) found support for this portion of their model and acknowledge that this finding has received support from others (e.g., Atkinson & Lefferts, 1972). They argue that to obtain a fuller understanding of the withdrawal process, we must consider cognitive and behavioral phenomena in addition to affective variables (e.g., job satisfaction, organizational commitment). Somers (1996) concurs that “it is not unreasonable to suggest that physical attachment is accompanied by psychological attachment such that when the latter deteriorates, the former occurs.”

Lee and Mitchell (1994) proposed the unfolding model of voluntary turnover as a reaction to their tiring of studies not focusing on the psychological process of quitting. The major components in their model of voluntary turnover include the “shocks to the system” and the amount of psychological analysis that precedes a decision to quit and the act of quitting. They argue that the psychological processes can vary from a highly rational comparison of alternatives to a quick judgment unfettered by multiple considerations. The process of voluntarily leaving unfolds over time, but the speed and reasons for leaving differ across employees. Some employees have a precipitating event, some decide quickly, and some search for alternatives. Lee, Mitchell, Wise, and Fireman (1996) encourage future research on an individual’s first thoughts about quitting and making the decision to quit. They suggest that this systematic difference in time across the decision path may constitute a new and interesting research direction.