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New Research from EBRI:

Job Tenure for U.S. Workers Rises Slightly, Now Just Over 5 Years

WASHINGTON—The median length of time that full-time workers stay in their jobs ticked up slightly in 2010, to just over five years, continuing a slow increase in job tenure that began in 2004, according to a new report by the nonpartisan Employee Benefit Research Institute (EBRI).

However, the EBRI analysis shows there are significantly different long-term trends by type of worker. For instance, job tenure for men has been falling since 1983, while women’s tenure has been rising over that period, to the point where the once-big gender gap in job tenure has almost closed. Because women’s tenure has been increasing while men’s tenure has been falling, the overall job tenure rate has been relatively stable.

EBRI also found that older workers appear to be staying in their jobs longer. But overall, the results show that the American work force over the past three decades has always had a high level of turnover—and probably will in the future as well.

“For the great majority of American workers, so-called ‘career jobs’ never existed, and they certainly do not exist today,” said Craig Copeland, EBRI senior research associate, and author of the study. “A distinct minority of workers have ever spent their entire working career at just one employer.”

The findings are published in the December *EBRI Notes*, “Job Tenure Trends, 1983–2010,” and are based on the latest data from the U.S. Census Bureau’s Current Population Survey. The full report is online at EBRI’s website at www.ebri.org

Among the findings in the report:

- **All workers:** Among all wage and salary workers age 25 or older, the median job tenure was 5.2 years in 2010, up slightly from the last CPS survey in 2008 and a modest increase from 5.0 years in 1983. (The median is the mid-point, with half above and half below.)
- **Long-term gender trends:** A closer look at long-term trends shows that the median job tenure for men dropped, from 5.9 years in 1983 to 5.1 years in 2010. However, job tenure for women increased, from 4.2 years in 1983 to 5.1 years in 2010. Overall, the growth in women’s tenure offset the decline for male workers over the period.

((more))

- **Older workers:** Older male and female workers also saw increases in median job tenure. For instance, the tenure for males ages 55–64 rose from 9.5 years in 2006 to 10.4 years in 2010. Women ages 55–64 saw the largest tenure increase over a longer time series, from 7.8 years in 1963 to 9.7 years in 2010.
- **Private vs. public sectors:** For private-sector workers, the median tenure held relatively steady from 1983–2002, at around 3.5 years, and subsequently trended upward, reaching 4.0 years in 2010. Among public-sector workers, median job tenure reached 7.1 years in 2010. Public-sector job tenure currently is about 80 percent higher than it is in the private sector.
- **Long- vs. short-tenured workers:** Workers with 20 or more years of tenure *increased* from 8.9 percent in 1983 to 10.9 percent in 2010. There was a corresponding *decrease* in the percentage of workers with one year or less of tenure, declining from 25.7 percent in 1983 to 17.4 percent in 2010. In 2010, workers having at least five years of tenure reached 51 percent, the highest level over the 1983–2010 period by nearly 2 percentage points.

Copeland noted that with unemployment remaining high in 2009 and 2010, the increase in median tenure levels indicates that workers with jobs are hanging onto them longer—especially at a time when people without jobs are having trouble finding one.

“It appears that workers who have jobs are mostly staying in them, and those without jobs are not likely starting them,” Copeland said.

Copeland noted that these tenure results indicate that workers are likely to continue to change jobs frequently in the future, just as they have done historically in the past. This has a number of major implications, he added: Traditional pension plans have limited benefits for short-term workers, which makes it all the more important that workers who participate in a 401(k)-type plan retain their retirement savings when they change jobs.

EBRI is a private, nonprofit research institute based in Washington, DC, that focuses on health, savings, retirement, and economic security issues. EBRI does not lobby and does not take policy positions.

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