

# ORGANISATIONAL COMMITMENT: DO HUMAN RESOURCE PRACTICES MAKE A DIFFERENCE?

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There has been a dramatic increase in interest in recent years in the concept of organisational commitment (OC) or employee loyalty to the firm, both in terms of its conceptual clarity (Cooper and Hartley, 1991) and its value in explaining the high levels of performance and productivity experienced by some European and American organisations (Lincoln and Kallenberg, 1990; Peters and Waterman, 1982; Sparrow and Pettigrew, 1988).

In addition, the burgeoning literature on the strategic management of human resources (Beer *et al.*, 1984; Guest, 1987; Iles, Mabey and Robertson, 1980) ascribes a central role for human resource practices in inculcating high levels of commitment to the firm amongst employees. Human resource practices in the areas of recruitment and selection, socialisation, training, appraisal and rewards are seen as instrumental in creating a culture within organisations which places a high priority on teamwork, flexibility, superior quality and productivity (Walton, 1985; Toner, 1985; 1987). However, while some research has focused on the role of human resource practices in creating OC (cf. Iles, Mabey and Robertson, 1990; Ogilvie, 1986) the link is more frequently asserted rather than measured. In particular, few studies control for the usual explanations of OC when assessing the impact of human resource practices, and multivariate analysis is rarely used. It is worth noting in passing that there have been critiques of the OC concept itself (Cooper and Hartley 1991) which highlights the fact that it is essentially a unitarist concept; the notion of commitment to organisational goals is itself problematic as sub cultures comprised of different interest groups may co-exist within organisations while possessing completely different perceptions of organisational reality (Weick 1969) and the legitimacy of organisational goals or missions (Hartley and Kelly 1986).

## Definitions of Organisational Commitment

Reviews of the concept of organisational commitment reveal that there is little consensus with respect to the meaning of the term. Definitions have ranged from Becker's (1960) 'commitments came into being when a person making a side bet, links extraneous interests with a consistent line of activity' to Mowday *et al's* (1979) definition

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of organisational commitment as ‘the relative strength of an individual’s identification with and involvement in a particular organisation’. In essence, the concept implies that via some process the individual develops a bond of loyalty to the organisation. There are however two main bodies of thought as to the process by which this comes about. The first approach may be described as the ‘exchange theory’ of organisational commitment and is associated with the work of Becker (1960) and Hrebiniak and Alutto (1972). The second approach is referred to as the attitudinal theory of organisational commitment and is associated with the work of Buchanan (1974), Mowday et al (1979) and Porter et al. (1974).

### **The Exchange Approach to OC**

The basic assumption of the exchange approach is that individuals exchange their contributions to the organisation in return for certain rewards and privileges granted by the organisation to them. If the exchange is positive from the employee’s point of view then loyalty to the firm increases.

The exchange theory of commitment emphasises the role of individual organisational transactions and encompasses a notion of pay off in terms of rewards/punishments allocated to individuals by organisations.

Hrebiniak and Alutto (1972) use the term ‘calculated’ commitment to describe the essence of this approach and define it as ‘a structural phenomenon which occurs as a result of individual organisational transactions and alterations in side bets or investments over time’. Individuals become bound to the organisation by virtue of the fact that they have ‘side bets’ or sunk costs (e.g. a pension) invested in the organisation which they cannot afford to lose. The scale developed by Hrebiniak and Alutto (1972) is frequently used to measure this type of OC.

### **The Attitudinal Approach to OC**

The attitudinal approach differs from the calculative approach in that it emphasises the affective (emotional) attachment of the individual to the organisation. Within this perspective, organisational commitment is viewed as a state in which the individual identifies with the organisation and its goals and wishes to maintain membership of that organisation. As Coopey and Hartley (1991) point out, the attitudinal approach is the most accepted viewpoint and within it the most popular definition is that of Porter et al (1974) who define organisational commitment as the relative strength of the individual’s identification with and involvement in an organisation. According to them, it consists of three factors: (a) a strong belief in and acceptance of the organisation’s goals and values; (b) a willingness to exert considerable effort on behalf of the organisational and (c) a strong desire to remain in the organisation. One of the reasons why commitment is so attractive to human resource practitioners is implicit within this definition. The definition implies that effort is expended in pursuit of organisational goals and therefore

can be expected to increase productivity and performance within firms. On a more negative note, Lincoln and Kallenberg (1990) note that:

“... when an organisation finds the means to elicit the commitment of its members it has at its disposal a very powerful mechanism of control. Indeed, the new interest in organisational commitment as an employee work orientation appears to stem from the realisation that the problem of control in organisations is in large measure solved when the commitment of its members is high. Committed members are self directed...”

The scale most frequently used to measure attitudinal commitment is that of Mowday, Steers and Porter (1982).

### **Organisational Actions and Human Resource Practices**

Attitudinal and calculative commitment (Mathieu and Zajac, 1990) are not entirely distinguishable concepts. It can be argued that one may join an organisation for calculative reasons (calculative OC) but over time this develops into an affective bond to the organisation (attitudinal OC) whereby the individual is strongly motivated to maintain membership of the organisation. In such a scenario, organisational actions can be seen to play an important role in converting calculative predispositions into an affective attachment to the organisation. As Iles *et al* (1990) point out

“HRM practices ... may well generate feelings of attachment, reciprocity and identification. Such practices are also perhaps more directly under organisational influence than the task or role variables, supervisory behaviour, or personality variables more often studied in this area”.

For example, the manner in which the new recruit is inducted, trained, developed, appraised and rewarded can be expected to have a significant influence upon the process whereby calculative commitment is converted into attitudinal commitment. Organisational actions in these areas will also determine whether the recruit who held favourable attitudes to the organisation prior to joining will continue to do so. Realistic job previews (RJP), psychological ‘fit’ with the employing organisation and the influences of co-workers and supervisors exert a powerful influence upon the individuals early socialisation experience with the organisation. Where careful attention is not paid to issues such as RJP, psychological ‘fit’ and careful indoctrination of norms, it has been shown to lead to negative organisational outcomes such as high levels of turnover, lateness and absenteeism. (Mowday, Steers and Porter, 1979).

### **Recruitment, Selection and Socialisation Practices**

The early experiences of a new recruit (Buchanan, 1974) exerts an important impact on the development of OC. New employees occupy ‘boundary role’ positions where they often feel uncomfortable as they adjust to the norms, values, beliefs and activities of their new organisation. Theoretically they are also at their most malleable (although this is

age and experience related). Participation in an intense socialisation process which emphasises the importance of employee commitment to the firm as a specific norm can therefore be expected to be influential in shaping employees organisational expectations and levels of OC. Organisations can help to reduce felt anxieties during this period and as a result induce identification with the organisation. If the induction process assists employees in gaining control and mastery of their job situation individuals will be more likely to identify with their organisation. The prospects for increasing employees' levels of OC is therefore increased.

Longitudinal research by Mabey (1986) on a sample of graduates examined the impact of pre and post job expectations of OC in relation to specific aspects of the job. It was discovered that 'matched expectations' was significantly correlated with OC. Premack and Wanous (1984) have also demonstrated the importance of RJP for OC. It would appear that RJP lower unrealistic expectations for new recruits thus reducing the likelihood of an induction crisis, where aspects of the job do not live up to expectations and which in turn may precipitate a decision to quit the organisation. Chatman's (1991) research on a sample of 71 entry level auditors over a two and a half year period demonstrates how employee-organisation fit is influenced by both selection and the socialisation practices used in the induction process. Her results show that recruits whose values at entry match those of the firm adjust more quickly to it and that vigorous socialisation creates stronger employee organisation fit. It was also discovered that those recruits who possessed the strongest 'value fit' with the organisation feel most satisfied and are most likely to stay with the organisation.

Specific socialisation techniques used by the firms in Chatman's (1991) study included social activities, a mentor program and actual time spent in training. It is evident from the longitudinal research cited above that organisations who invest time and effort into selecting employees with a close psychological fit to the organisation, will significantly increase the possibilities of employees developing a sense of attachment to the organisation. Similarly the pay off for carefully structured induction practices can be seen in terms of increased levels of OC amongst new recruits.

### **Assessment, Reward and Supervisory Practices**

Recruiting employees with a commitment pre-disposition is of course only one element of creating a high commitment organisational culture. Performance management including the various facets of performance appraisal, pay and supervisory style will also impact upon employees' sense of attachment and identification with the organisation. Indeed in the model of human resource management developed by Beer *et al* (1984) human resource practices in these areas are envisaged as having an important role in creating high levels of OC within organisations.

Studies by Robertson *et al* (cited in Iles *et al*, 1990) in the financial services sector on the impact of highly structured performance management techniques, including the

use of appraisal centres, indicate that OC is indeed significantly affected by assessment decisions. Staff were streamed according to their performance and OC was measured before and after the employees were assessed. The results indicate that unsuccessful groups showed much lower levels of OC than successful groups and that unsuccessful groups indicated higher propensity to leave the organisation, particularly so in the case of employees in their early career stage. Kanter (1977) also found that opportunities for promotion and the perceived equity of promotion decisions were positively related to OC. Ogilvie's (1986) study of agricultural employees supports these findings. He found that the perceived fairness of promotions and perceptions of the accuracy of the merit system accounted for significant levels of OC amongst his sample. Supervisory practices were also found by Ogilvie (1986) to be important in influencing OC. Supervisory practices play a pivotal role in explicating the organisation's culture, in the sense that the supervisor interacts most regularly with employees; the extent to which these interactions are judged positively will affect the employees' attachment to the organisation. Studies of the induction crisis, for example, are replete with examples where poor supervision precipitates the decision by employees to quit their organisation.

Supervisors administer, explain and enforce organisational policies including the very important ones relating to grievance and discipline administration. Morris and Sherman (1981) found positive relationships between supervisors consideration and OC. Supervisors also play an important role in relation to the implementation of job design practices *vis a vis* job rotation and job enlargement decisions. The literature on the link between job design and OC is extensive and it is not our intention to review it here. In general, where jobs are structured to increase skill variety, task identity and task significance, autonomy and feedback (Hackman and Oldham, 1976), levels of OC can be expected to increase. Studies by Steers (1977) indicate that organisational characteristics such as the level of employee involvement and employee security also enhance employees' commitment to the firm.

Commitment has also been found to be positively related to actual pay levels (Ritzer and Trice, 1969) and pay equity (Sheldon, 1972; Rhodes and Steers, 1981). Bell and Hanson (1984) found some general support for the proposition that shareownership increases loyalty to the firm. Underlying this proposition is the notion that owning shares in some way 'locks in' the individual to the firm echoing the exchange approach to OC.

### **Conventional Explanations of Organisational Commitment**

This literature is surveyed in Mathieu and Zajac, 1990 and only a sample is reviewed in this paper. Briefly, studies can be divided up into those which examine the impact of personal characteristics, job characteristics and work experiences on OC. Personal characteristics such as age and tenure (Buchanan, 1974; Grusky, 1966; Sheldon, 1971) educational level and personality variables, particularly need for achievement (Steers, 1977), have all been found to have weak but positive (except in the case of education)

relationships with OC. In terms of job characteristics such as skill variety, autonomy, task identity, feedback and opportunities for social interaction, positive associations between these variables and OC have been found by Hackman and Lawler (1971), Lawler and Hall (1970) and Tannenbaum (1980). In relation to work experiences, organisational dependability, perceptions of one's own personal importance to the organisation and 'met expectations' were found to be positively associated with OC in Buchanans (1974) study and that of Steers (1977). Opportunities for social interaction were also found to be positively related to OC in Sheldon's (1971) study.

## **Research Objectives and Methodology**

The primary aim of the study reported here was to examine the antecedents of OC, focusing on the link with human resource practices. In particular, our objective is to consider the impact of human resource practices on OC while simultaneously controlling for the more conventional explanations of OC considered above. Four high technology firms agreed to participate in the study, chosen because they offer examples of 'best practice' in terms of their approach to managing their workforce. In reality, this meant choosing four subsidiaries of US multinationals, three of which were engaged in the manufacture of personal computers and their associated components, while the fourth is a fine chemical manufacturer. The advantage of focusing solely on US subsidiaries is that one factor, namely nationality of parent corporation, is controlled for. The sample included two unionised and two non-unionised companies.

Scale range as regards the measures used is indicated in parenthesis. Categorical variables were coded using a binary system.

## **Organisational Commitment**

This was measured using the fifteen item Organisational Commitment Questionnaire (OCQ) developed by Mowday, Porter and Steers (1982). The OCQ is one of the most widely used measures of OC and is supported by extensive measurement data. It is a self administered instrument with six items negatively phrased and reverse coded. A seven point Likert scale is used for all items (Chronbach's alpha = 0.90).

## **Personal Characteristics**

These included position in the organisation (1 = Production, 6 = Management) marital status (1 = married), age (1-4), sex (1 = male), years in present organisation (1-7), years in present position (1-8), education (1-6) and the respondents needs for involvement, affiliation, autonomy and dominance (1-7). The Manifest Needs Questionnaire developed by Steers and Braunstein (1976) was used to measure these four needs.

### Job Characteristics

Scales used were those developed by Hackman and Lawler (1971). Six questions were selected from their seventeen item scale to tap employee perceptions of six job dimensions: skill variety, autonomy, task identity, feedback, dealing with others and friendship opportunities (1 - 7).

### Work Experiences

Measures were selected from Buchanans (1974) instrument. Single item measures chosen included group attitudes towards the organisation, expectations realisation, personal importance and organisational dependability (1 - 7).

### Human Resource Practices

These included measures of intrinsic and extrinsic reward satisfaction, perceptions of shareownership, perceptions of the relevance of performance appraisal schemes; satisfaction with training and development, health, safety, welfare and communication structures within the organisation.

### Response Rates

Details of response rate by company are outlined in Table 1. Of the sample of two hundred and forty members, one hundred and forty three usable questionnaires were returned yielding a sixty percent response rate, which is above average for a postal questionnaire. Access was gained through the personnel officer in each company, with each respondent receiving a carefully worded cover letter guaranteeing anonymity and confidentiality and a questionnaire with a self addressed stamped envelope for return to the researchers.

**Table 1: Organisational Commitment Survey: Breakdown of Survey Sample**

<i>Company Union/Non Union</i>	<i>Size 'N'</i>	<i>Response by Firm</i>	<i>Number of Questionnaires Sent</i>	<i>Response Rate</i>
A Union	400	39	50	78%
B Non Union	700	50	70	71%
C Non Union	650	29	70	41%
D Union	280	25	50	50%
	<hr/> 2,030	<hr/> 143	<hr/> 240	<hr/> 60%

## Descriptive and Correlational Results

Company Profile: Four North American owned manufacturing (high tech/electronics) companies participated in the study. All companies were performing well and were listed in the 'Irish Business Top 500 Companies Survey' (*Irish Business*, 1988).

No statistically significant differences in OC were found between the union/non-union companies ( $x_u = 5.04$ ,  $SD_u = 3.73$ ;  $x_{Nu} = 5.37$ ,  $SD_{Nu} = 2.70$ ;  $t = -1.12$ )

As a result the respondents were treated as a single sample.

### Personal Characteristics Correlates of Organisational Commitment

Age ( $r = 0.28$ ), education ( $r = -0.19$ ), need for achievement ( $r = 0.32$ ), need for affiliation ( $r = 0.18$ ) and need for dominance ( $r = 0.20$ ) were significant ( $p \leq 0.05$ ) correlates of OC. Only variables significant at the 0.05 level or greater are reported for the sake of parsimony.

### Job Characteristic Correlates of Organisational Commitment

Here we are concerned about the extent to which variations in the task requirements of the job influence individuals' commitment. Buchanan (1974) and Stevens *et al* (1978) all found job characteristics to be positively related to organisational commitment. Significant correlates ( $p \leq 0.05$ ) with OC in this study included skill variety ( $r = 0.31$ ), autonomy ( $r = 0.18$ ), feedback ( $r = 0.44$ ) and friendship opportunities ( $r = 0.28$ ).

### Work Experience Correlates of Organisational Commitment

Work experiences were highly correlated with OC. Significant relationships ( $p \leq 0.01$ ) included group attitudes toward the organisation ( $r = 0.53$ ), met expectations ( $r = 0.65$ ), personal importance ( $r = 0.47$ ) and organisational dependability ( $r = 0.63$ ).

### Human Resource Practice Correlates of Organisational Commitment

It was pointed out earlier that very little emphasis has been placed on the direct relationship between human resource practices and commitment. Significant relationships ( $p \leq 0.05$ ) were found between OC and both intrinsic ( $r = 0.41$ ) and extrinsic rewards ( $r = 0.46$ ); the opportunities to own shares in the company ( $r = 0.24$ ), and perceptions of the performance appraisal scheme (company interested in my promotion prospects,  $r = 0.36$ ; performance appraisals are judged to be worthwhile,  $r = 0.38$ ). Other significant relationships with OC included satisfaction with training opportunities ( $r = 0.37$ ), satisfaction with health and safety ( $r = 0.25$ ) and satisfaction with communication structures ( $r = 0.18$ ) in the company.

## **Multivariate Analysis**

While the bivariate analysis presented seems to indicate general support for each of the sets of variables tested, they do not assess the unique contribution of each of the sets of variables. This was identified earlier as a major weakness in the literature. The four antecedent categories examined were personal characteristics, job characteristics, work experiences and human resource practices. In order to examine how well these categories predicted organisational commitment, ordinary least squares multiple regression analysis was carried out. Interest was focused in an attempt to identify those specific variables that most influenced organisational commitment. Therefore, the total number of variables was reduced to the smallest set of variables that efficiently predicted commitment. Data reduction was accomplished by the stepwise multiple regression of the commitment measure on the variables within each category of antecedents. Having done this, direct entry multiple regression was carried out for the organisational commitment measure using each of the antecedent variables that made a significant contribution to the variance explained in commitment. Table 2 reports the results of the stepwise multiple regression analysis.

## **Results of Multiple Regression Analysis for Specific Antecedent Variables on Organisational Commitment**

Each of the antecedent variables shown in Table 2 that made a significant contribution to the variance explained in commitment were included in a stepwise multiple regression analysis to identify those specific variables that most strongly influenced commitment. The results are presented in Table 3.

**Table 2: Stepwise Multiple Regressions of Organisational Commitment on the Variables within each Category of Antecedents: Beta Coefficients and Significance Levels (Standard Errors in Parenthesis)**

<i>Category</i>	<i>Variable</i>	<i>Step</i>	<i>Beta</i>	<i>R<sup>2</sup></i>	<i>R<sup>2</sup></i>
Personal characteristics	Need for achievement	1	0.32*** (0.08)	0.10	0.10
	Age	2	0.28*** (0.07)	0.18	0.17
Job characteristics	Feedback	1	0.39*** (0.08)	0.19	0.18
	Friendship Opportunities	2	0.19** (0.08)	0.23	0.21
Work experiences	Expectations Realisation	1	0.42*** (0.07)	0.50	0.50
	Organisational Dependability	2	0.37*** (0.07)	0.50	0.50
Human resource practices	Communications	1	0.31*** (0.08)	0.26	0.25
	Extrinsic Rewards	2	0.28*** (0.08)	0.33	0.32
	Performance Appraisal (Waste of Time)	3	-0.19** (0.07)	0.37	0.35

\*  $p \leq 0.05$  level

\*\*  $p \leq 0.01$  level

\*\*\*  $p \leq 0.001$  level

2 tailed t-test

**Table 3: Stepwise Multiple Regression of Organisational Commitment on Specific Antecedent Variables, Beta Coefficients and Significance Levels (Standard Errors in Parenthesis)**

<i>Independent Variables</i>	<i>Step</i>	<i>Beta</i>	<i>R<sup>2</sup></i>	<i>R<sup>2</sup></i>
Met Expectations	1	0.33*** (0.07)	0.45	0.45
Organisation Dependability	2	0.31*** (0.07)	0.53	0.52
Feedback	3	0.22*** (0.06)	0.58	0.57
Age	4	0.18*** (0.05)	0.61	0.60
Need for Achievement	5	0.14** (0.06)	0.63	0.62
Friendship Opportunities	6	0.11* (0.06)	0.65	0.63

\*  $p \leq 0.05$  Level

\*\*  $p \leq 0.01$  Level

\*\*\*  $p \leq 0.001$  Level

2 tailed t-test

## Discussion and Conclusion

It can be seen from Table 3 that six variables entered the equation at a significant level yielding an  $R^2$  of 0.63. All of these predictors with the exception of friendship opportunities were significant predictors of OC. However none of the HRP measures survived the analysis. The question to ask here is why? Is it because there is no direct link between HRPs and OC? Is it because HRPs exert their influence via their indirect influence on some of the variables in Table 3? Is it because the measures of HRP are not robust or inappropriate? The strongest possibility here would seem to be that HRPs influence OC indirectly. After all, 'met expectations' and 'organisational dependability' measures are global measures which presumably reflect the extent to which the organisation has lived up to its promises in terms of pay and rewards, training and development, equity of assessment and so on. In this case 'met expectations' and 'organisational dependability' may in fact reflect the indirect effects of HRPs on training, rewards, promotion etc. This argument can also be applied to the case of 'feedback' and 'friendship opportunities' which emerged as significant predictors in Table 3. The extent to which jobs and organisations are designed to provide systematic feedback on performance and to provide opportunities for social interaction may also be construed as indirect effects of HRPs particularly in the job design area.

How robust are our measures of HRP? After all they only measure perceptions of human resource practices rather than 'objective' policies. Ideally one would develop an index to measure the frequency, sophistication and coverage of human resource policies within companies and link this to OC. For example in the case of recruitment policies one would wish to measure (a) whether a written policy existed, agreed by the top management team, (b) what practices were used on a scale of sophistication ranging from basic interviewing to sophisticated biodata and selection test approaches and (c), what percentage of the workforce was covered by these practices. The latter could be used as an indicator of single status and might highlight that different 'psychological contracts' apply to different categories of workers.

Our evidence on the link between OC and HRPs is at best inconclusive. A proponent of human resource management could argue that our HRPs indirectly influence OC while a critic of personnel management might argue that no direct links exist between OC and HRPs and that consequently little investment in HRPs should take place by organisations. There are echoes here of Herzberg *et als'* (1959) view that personnel policies and practices can only reduce the dissatisfactions of employees but never raise job satisfaction levels. By extension, if personnel practices do not increase job satisfaction levels they cannot be expected to affect OC.

More detailed research is needed to resolve this debate. In particular research of a longitudinal nature is needed which would measure OC and HRPs over time in selected firms. Ideally these would be single industry studies and would incorporate 'objective' measures of human resource practices designed to distinguish between rudimentary or *ad hoc* personnel management approaches versus sophisticated strategically integrated approaches. Until such studies emerge one can draw either solace or despair from the results reported here.

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