



NATURE AND ANTECEDENTS OF ORGANIZATIONAL COMMITMENT: CONSIDERATIONS FOR HUMAN RESOURCE MANAGEMENT

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Abstract

Organizational commitment - a central goal for human resources management - has received considerable attention from managers and comportamental researchers. Obtaining elevated levels of employee commitment towards his/her organization requires management strategies that recognize its multidimensional nature and related variables.

This research is particularly justified by the need to render the concept of organizational commitment operational through the identification of behaviours and attitudes that have a significant impact upon performance and organizational efficiency.

To this end, we have set out the components that make up organizational commitment, its nature and its antecedents, and we have examined potential implications for human resources management. Given the generally accepted connection between organizational commitment and the results/behaviours of a business, it was possible to reach relevant conclusions and illustrate several actions and specific strategies that can extend the scope for human resources management action in regard to organizational commitment.

Key words: organizational commitment, human resources, organizational performance.

NATUREZA E ANTECEDENTES DO COMPROMISSO ORGANIZACIONAL: CONSIDERAÇÕES PARA A GESTÃO DE RECURSOS HUMANOS

Resumo

O compromisso organizacional, sendo um objectivo central a atingir pela direcção de recursos humanos, tem recebido considerável atenção por parte de gestores e de investigadores do comportamento. A obtenção de um elevado compromisso dos - empregados para com a organização requer estratégias de

gestão que tenham em consideração a sua natureza multidimensional e as suas variáveis condicionantes. Justifica-se o presente trabalho pela necessidade de operacionalização do conceito e pela explicitação de comportamentos e atitudes que têm um efectivo impacte sobre a performance e a eficácia organizacional.

Com essa finalidade, delimitaram-se os componentes que integram a noção de compromisso organizacional, a natureza e os antecedentes que o condicionam, tendo sido aprofundados as suas potenciais implicações na planificação e na gestão dos recursos humanos. Da constatação empírica das relações entre o compromisso organizacional e os resultados/comportamentos para a empresa, extraíram-se relevantes conclusões que permitem ilustrar um conjunto de acções e estratégias específicas, destinadas a potenciar a capacidade de actuação da direcção de recursos humanos sobre o compromisso organizacional.

Palavras-chave: compromisso organizacional, recursos humanos, performance organizacional.

INTRODUCTION¹

Achieving an elevated level of employee organisational commitment is considered one of the main goals of human resources management in many companies. Indeed, there is a general conviction that organizational commitment has a positive impact upon business performance. However, managing this attitude requires companies to tailor their human resources strategies to take into consideration how organizational commitment is a multidimensional concept, as recognized in several recent studies.

This study aims to make the concept of organizational commitment useable from a business perspective through a rigorous analysis of its character and antecedents. It seems essential to begin by clarifying the concept to be applied by company managers, and particularly by human resource managers.

Hence, after a state-of-the-art review, we analyse the evolution of organizational commitment meanings, with special attention to theoretical contributions and current multidimensional models. Having established a reference matrix, thorough analysis is carried out on each component to evaluate its relevance to human resources management. Based on empirical evidence, we then verify which elements condition organizational commitment, thereby helping organizations to select appropriate policies and strategies for impact evaluation within organizational contexts.

CONCEPTUAL DEFINITIONS OF ORGANIZATIONAL COMMITMENT

Employee commitment to their company has received great attention from both managers and researchers (Gallagher and McLean, 2001) and this makes

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organizational commitment the most developed and mature construct of work commitment (Morrow and McElroy, 1993, p.1). However, such development does not provide for any consensual definition. On the contrary, it leads to several definitions of the organizational commitment concept (Mowday, Porter and Steers, 1982, p.20)², and this fact complicates any extended understanding of organizational commitment (Meyer and Herscovitch, 2001).

Nevertheless, the literature on organizational commitment has progressed to integrate broad reaching conceptions, such as Etziane, some more specific approaches, generally one-dimensional in character and including Mowday, Porter and Steers, as well as some recent efforts designed to identify components of organizational commitment from a multidimensional perspective.

Etziane (1961) developed one of the first typologies of organizational commitment. According to this approach, organizational commitment reflects the degree of conformity that individuals experience with respect to organizational directives, and it can be expressed in the following ways, which, although subdivided in three different states, represent an attitude continuum of concerning organizational commitment:

- i) Moral, where a positive and intense orientation in relation to the company is established, starting from internalization of the company's goals, values and organizational norms, and identification with authority ;
- ii) Scheming, characterized by a less intense connection with the company, which is grounded in an exchange relationship between the company and its employees. In this case, individuals make a commitment to the company because they consider they will benefit. There appears to be a relationship between how they perform and the kind of rewards they receive.
- iii) Alienated, which reflects a negative orientation towards the organization, and is grounded in situations where individuals find their behavioural options limited.

The great difference between this approach and those more recent lies in how the latter do not consider alienated or negative consequences and implications for organizations regarding organizational commitment. Furthermore, they define it as "a positive identification from individuals regarding their organization, based on attitudes that reflect beliefs, acceptance of goals, efforts or desire to continue, and explicit and irrevocable behaviours" (Bouzas and Castro, 1986, p.168). In this perspective, organizational commitment is seen as a broader attitude, more

² According to Meyer and Allen (1997, pp.15-16), this confusion exists both because this concept has been applied in description of different constructs and described in a range of fashions. Sometimes, there is no correspondence between the concept and the measurement applied in empirical research.

than passive loyalty, and implying an active relationship where individuals are predisposed to give something in contribution towards the organizational well-being.

In this view, one of the most well-known definitions that is widely used in empirical research comes from Mowday, Steers and Porter (1979, p.20)³. They consider organizational commitment *a strength of identification of an individual with the organization and particularly with his participation in that organization. Thus, conceptually, it can be characterized with three factors: i) deep conviction and acceptance of objectives and values of the organization; ii) predisposition to exercise a considerable effort to benefit the organization; iii) strong desire to stand as an organization member.*

Regarding this contribution, Kidron (1978) and Gould (1979) refer to correspondence between the character of this definition and the scheming and moral notions proposed by Etziane. It is important to emphasize that the organizational commitment concept and Organizational Commitment Questionnaire (OCQ) of Mowday, Porter and Steers were elaborated with a one-dimensional structure⁴, where all items contribute towards obtaining an attitude value, so these characteristics can take place simultaneously while Etziane's classification rejects this possibility.

More recently, organizational commitment theorists and researchers have begun to recognize it as a multidimensional concept (Morrow, 1993; Meyer, Stanley, Herscovitch and Topolnytsky, 2002). This consensus motivated research seeking to identify the dimensions incorporated in organizational commitment. Jaros, Jermier, Koehler and Sincich have all made contributions even if the more representative and best known models are the Meyer & Allen and O'Reilly, Chatman & Caldwell models. These define incorporated components regarding organizational commitment principles where each component reflects the motives that generate employee engagement with his/her organization.

The Meyer and Allen multidimensional concept

Meyer and Allen (1984, 1990, 1991) proposed an orientation conciliating earlier approaches. This perspective was developed through a synthesis of aspects common to several one-dimensional definitions of organizational commitment.

³ The authors developed a questionnaire on organizational commitment (OCQ) that facilitated the diffusion and acceptance of their definition. It is generally considered the first measurement to present acceptable psychometric qualities enabling measurement of the concept. Details can be found in Porter, Steers, Mowday and Boulian (1974) and in Mowday, Steers and Porter (1979).

⁴ Angle and Perry (1981) achieved two distinct factors in their OCQ empirical analysis. One defined items that evaluate the employee predisposition to remaining in the organization while the other integrated items fostering employee support for the organizational goals.

They defined organizational commitment as a psychological state that characterizes the employee's relationship with their company. Meyer and Allen consider that this state bears a strong influence on employee decisions as to whether or not to continue as a member.

Specifically, they propose the definition of a commitment that is characterized by the intensity of a psychological link between the worker and organization, and which simultaneously includes differing degrees of each of the three dimensions of organizational commitment: *i)* affective, *ii)* continuity and *iii)* normative.

Firstly, affective commitment proposes the emotional adhesion of the staff member, involving identification with and implications for the organization⁵. Continuity commitment presupposes the recognition by the worker of associated costs should he/she abandon the organization. This means that an individual with continuity commitment is aware that there are several associated costs on leaving the company of employment⁶. Finally, normative commitment reflects a feeling of moral obligation that an employee feels relative to his continuation in the company.

The Meyer and Allen model, with its tri-dimensional commitment, has been one of the most commonly applied particularly because several factors of analysis reinforce these three dimensions as independent constructs with each measurement dimension turning in a positive psychometric evaluation. This model has thus far received the most extensive empirical evaluation and further enables the comparison of differing empirical studies on organizational commitment.

Regarding this model, it should be emphasized that some empirical research points to the need for refinement of both the conceptualization and operational measurements. Indeed, some studies found greater levels of correlation between affective and normative commitment than would be expected (Allen and Meyer, 1993; Cohen, 1996; Irving, Coleman and Cooper, 1997; De Frutos, Ruíz and San Martín, 1998; Meyer, Stanley, Herscovitch and Topolnytsky, 2002; and Brown, 2003). These results suggest that some feelings of obligation or affective adhesion may not be totally independent of each other.

Secondly, McGee and Ford (1987) and Hackett, Bycio and Hausdorf (1994) suggest that the continuity commitment scale must enclose two related dimensions: one reflecting sacrifices incurred by employees when leaving the organization and another measuring their recognition of the lack of alternative job choices. The empirical evidence concerning this latter possibility is mixed. Some studies confirm the multidimensionality of continuity commitment (McGee and Ford (1987), Meyer, Allen and Gellatly (1990) and De Frutos, Ruíz and San Martín (1998), while other

⁵ Meyer and Allen maintain that most definitions reviewed and identified in the literature can be considered equivalent to this dimension, even if they include elements other than the two components.

⁶ With this dimension, Meyer and Allen try to enclose definitions that take into account Becker's side-bet (1960, p.32) concept; a term referring to the investments understood by an individual as transforming into losses on leaving the company.

research proves its one-dimensionality (Dunham, Grube and Castenada (1994) and Ko, Price and Mueller (1997).

The O'Reilly, Caldwell and Chatman Multidimensional Concept

Another multidimensional model of organizational commitment is from O'Reilly, Caldwell and Chatman (1986, 1990, 1991), based on previous work by Kelman (1958). This model, in its initial formulation, estimates that organizational commitment reflects a psychological link between employee and company which could combine aspects of three elements: *i*) obedience, *ii*) identification and *iii*) internalization.

- i*) According to these authors, obedience (lately renamed instrumental commitment) happens when an individual adopts specific attitudes and behaviours with the intention of achieving certain rewards or avoiding punishment while not including shared beliefs and values. They also referred to how obedience might generate negative implications for organizations because this kind of adhesion can be transitory and does not involve any acceptance of norms or values that benefit the organization⁷.
- ii*) Identification takes effect when an individual accepts the influence of the organization with a view to establishing and maintaining a satisfactory relationship, generating a desire for affiliation. Here, the employee can be proud to be a part of the organization, respect its values while not actually adopting them.
- iii*) Finally, internalization exists when an employee accepts the company's influence because company attitudes and behaviours are congruent with those of the employee. Hence, a connection between employee values and organization values is present. However, faced with the difficulty in distinguishing between identification and internalization due to measurements demonstrating certain problems regarding multicollinearity and correlation schemes with other variables, these authors went on to decide to combine these two commitment elements in a new measure named normative commitment⁸.

⁷ At the empirical level, this concept measure used to be positively associated with rotation between co-workers. This circumstance, combined with the non-association of this definition to those previously defined in the literature, led Meyer and Allen to question whether obedience should be considered as a real organizational commitment. Another possibility emerges because the authors assume that commitment on its own can generate behaviours without consequent rewards (Meyer and Allen, 1997, p.15).

⁸ Meyer and Allen considered that identification and internalization could be considered as the bases of affective commitment. That means the affective adhesion of staff to the organization, in the Meyer and Allen perspective, could be based on a desire to establish a grateful relationship with the company – identification – and/or the link between goals and values both of the individual and organization - internalization.

The Jaros, Jermier, Koehler and Sincich multidimensional concept

Finally, another proposal from Jaros, Jermier, Koehler and Sincich (1993) reflects the multidimensional nature of organizational commitment. However, this concept has not received the same attention as the previous one, thereby rendering evaluation difficult.

The authors consider that organizational commitment, as a psychological state, integrates three dimensions:

- i)* Continuity commitment, when employees feel the obligation to make a commitment to the organization due to the elevated monetary, social and psychological costs associated with leaving the organization;
- ii)* Affective commitment, according to Kanter (1968), is defined as psychological loyalty to the organization involving an emotional link. That is, a link based on feelings such as loyalty, happiness, pleasure of working in that company, etc;
- iii)* And finally, moral commitment. This expresses a degree of psychological adhesion due to the internalization of norms and identification with the organizational authority⁹. Individuals integrate goals and organizational values into their own personal identity¹⁰.

To summarise this review, table 1 sets out the core aspects of several concepts and analysis models in addition to other theoretical contributions.

ORGANIZATIONAL COMMITMENT ANTECEDENTS: CONTRIBUTION TO HUMAN RESOURCES MANAGEMENT

Empirical evidence of the relationship existing between various elements of organizational commitment and work results/behaviours potentially relevant to companies¹¹ explain the need to develop these components as a key goal for human resources management.

⁹ The first dimension, once again based on Becker's side-bet theory, features conceptual similarities with the continuity commitment of Meyer and Allen. To measure this dimension, Jaros, Jermier, Koehler and Sincich utilized a combination of several items from one of the first research projects carried out by Meyer and Allen (1984). On the other hand, for the second measurement, the authors applied a bipolar scale and, finally, the moral component of organizational commitment is measured through items developed by Gould and Penley (1982) and Werbel and Gould (1984), which have undergone significant empirical testing.

¹⁰ This approach to a certain extent takes into account Meyer and Allen's affective commitment, which corresponds to the latter two dimensions of Jaros, Jermier, Koehler and Sincich, who include loyalty feelings in the employee affective commitment definition and internalization of goals and values in their moral commitment definition.

¹¹ Empirical and theoretical literature on organizational commitment confirms that affective commitment in particular and normative commitment to a lesser degree have a significant impact on workplace performance, on reducing intentions to leave the company, and on some other cognitive variables that interfere in the

TABLE 1

Key similarities between definitions and organizational commitment models.

One-dimensional Contributions	Multidimensional Models			One-dimensional Contributions
	Meyer and Allen	O'Reilly, Chatman and Caldwell	Jaros, Jermier, Koehler and Sincich	
Kanter (1968, p.507) Sheldon (1971, p.143) Hall, Schneider and Nygren (1970, p. 176-177) Buchanan (1974, p. 553) Mowday, Porter and Steers (1982, p. 20)	Affective Commitment	Normative Commitment	Affective Commitment Moral Commitment	Gould and Penley (1982) Werbel and Gould (1984)
Wiener (1982, p. 421) Marsh and Mannari (1977, p.59)	Normative Commitment			
Kanter (1988, p.504) Becker (1960, p. 32) Hrebiniak and Alutto (1972, p.556)	Continuity Commitment		Continuity Commitment	Becker (1960, p. 32)
		Obedience		Kelman (1958)

To this end, it is fundamental to define the concept and identify just which antecedents contribute to organizational commitment components. Obviously, this inclusion only makes sense should human resources practices and strategies bear the ability to influence the development of organizational commitment.

According to Meyer and Allen (1997, p.109), the several factors that have been considered in the literature can be broken down into two different categories: near causes and distant causes.

The former, near causes, seems to carry a direct influence on some organizational commitment components. Broadly, these include:

- i) task characteristics and labour experiences. This integrates, for example, the working environment, implied challenges, degree of autonomy, variety in techniques and organizational support as perceived by staff in the course of their daily activities;
- ii) the level of conflict and role ambiguity experienced by collaborators. Role ambiguity consists of the difference between what an individual expects

intention process. However, continuity commitment seems to be relevant regarding voluntary employee rotation (Meyer, Stanley, Herscovitch and Topolnytsky, 2002; Allen and Meyer, 1996; Meyer, Allen, and Smith, 1993; Cohen, 1993; Jaros, Jermier, Koehler and Sincich, 1993 and Mayer and Schoorman, 1992). A review of the theme and summary scheme of relationships that the different components maintain with employee performance and cognitive variables in the leaving process is set out in Velando and Crespo (2004).

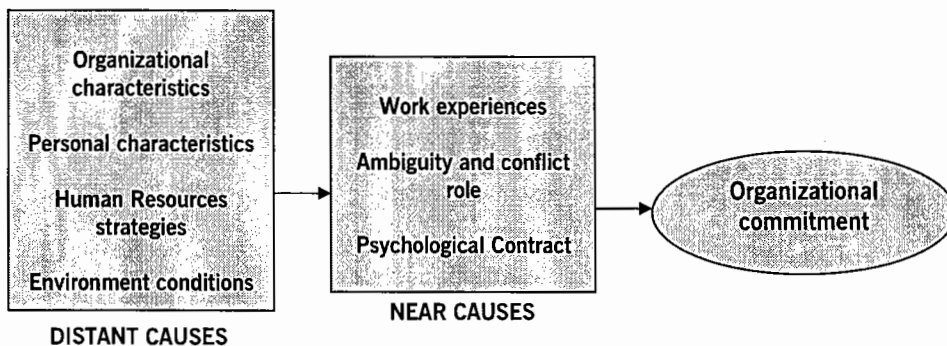
in regard to his work and that which he/she feels he/she should do. Conflict is related with individual perception as to the incompatibility of two or more tasks (Igbaria and Siegel, 1992, pp.104-105);

iii) and the psychological contract that defines the exchange relationship between the company and the employee. This psychological contract reflects expectations and beliefs, both company and employee perceptions as to the respect, duties and reciprocal obligations that constitute the exchange between the two parts – a basic aspect of organizational commitment. This deal - informal in nature, subjective and dynamic - regulates the behaviour of each party and establishes a link between them. Where members of staff perceive that their organization is not fulfilling the contract, this will affect their behaviours, attitudes and respect vis-à-vis the organization, probably reducing their level of commitment.

Distant causes take on an influence on commitment through their impact on near causes. Inside these kinds of antecedents we can include organizational characteristics, individual characteristics, environmental conditions and human resources practices and strategies¹².

FIGURE 1

Organizational commitment causes.



Source: Adapted from Meyer and Allen (1997, p.106).

Analyzing specific antecedents that have a major influence in organizational commitment components, we take as our reference the Meyer & Allen matrix (affective, continuity and normative commitment). Although in general terms (see figure 1), the variables affecting organizational commitment were jointly considered;

¹² At the empirical level, there is a need to emphasize that meta analysis both by Mathieu and Zajac (1990) as well as Meyer, Stanley, Herscovitch and Topolnysky (2002) seems to demonstrate that the demographic variables referred to provide only a minor effect on developing organizational commitment, independent of the actual component.

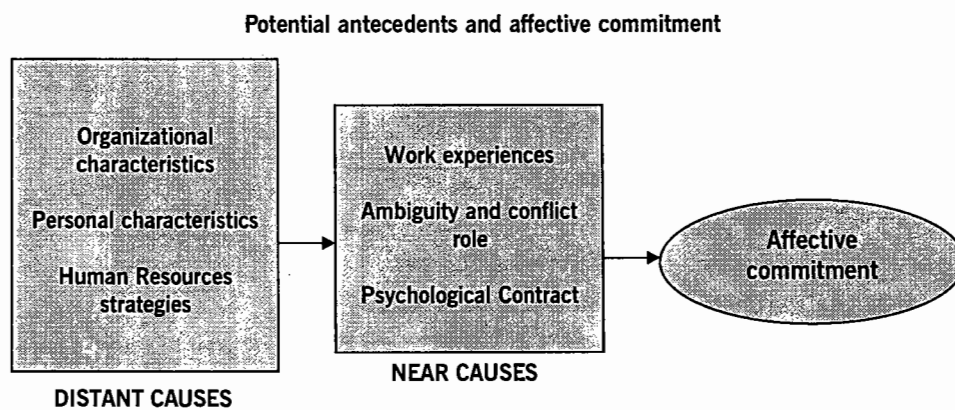
we emphasize the variables that we believe generate a major impact on each organizational commitment component.

Research in this field requires greater systematization at the theoretical and empirical level (Meyer and Herscovitch, 2001; and Meyer, Stanley, Herscovitch and Topolnytsky, 2002). The approach to affective commitment has produced a broader body of work but there remains only a restricted range of contributions regarding continuity and normative commitment and so on. Hence, we must consider this review as only an exploratory approach to this theme.

Affective commitment

At an empirical level, several studies and meta-analysis have examined specific relationships between affective commitment and several variables identified as antecedents (Buchanan, 1974; Bateman and Strasser, 1984; Mathieu and Zajac, 1990; Igbaria and Siegel, 1992; Shore, Barksdale and Shore, 1995; Coleman, Irving and Cooper, 1999; Meyer, Stanley, Herscovitch and Topolnytsky, 2002; and Bishop, Scott, Goldsby and Cropanzano, 2003). The variables and relationships studied are set out in figure 2.

FIGURE 2



Out of this collection of potential variables, the most commonly studied are personal and organizational characteristics and different human resources strategies.

a) *Personal characteristics*

Regarding affective commitment the most studied personal characteristic variables are gender, age, length of service in workplace, marital status, number of

children, education level, and so forth. Empirical studies demonstrate that these variables are neither strong nor consistent. The most positive relationships occur between affective commitment and age and length of service¹³.

Factors also under study within this category of affective commitment antecedents include the influence of several personality aspects – e.g. level of ambition, workplace ethics, task interest, etc. - on the interaction between working experiences and affective commitment. In this respect, there has only been a weak relationship. Only an individual's belief in own competences and an internal locus of control seem to have a positive relationship regarding affective commitment.

Finally, we need to emphasize that just as individuals experience different levels of propensity towards commitment, they may also manifest different degrees of affective commitment towards their organization. Although this aspect is taken as proven in studies by Pierce and Dunham (1987) and Lee, Ashford, Walsh and Mowday (1992), the results may not be quite so clear due to the measurement scales adopted.

b) Organizational characteristics

In this component, the most studied and cited variables are company size, degree of formalization and decentralization. Once again, empirical research does not generate any strong association with affective commitment. These results can be justified by the macro effect of these variables on the affective commitment configuration through the influence on near variables such as working experiences and definition of roles. These variables specifically bear a major influence on employee attitudes regarding their organization and are more related to daily activities and their connection with personal employee needs.

c) Human Resources strategies

Lastly, the relationship between several human resources strategies and affective commitment has been investigated. According to the empirical literature, we can affirm that out of all the aforementioned antecedents, human resources strategies generate the closest relationship, exhibiting greater consistency and a stronger impact¹⁴. This affirmation seems to confirm the ability of human resources management to alter the affective commitment of co-workers.

¹³ In the case of age, it is difficult to interpret this relationship as evidence because it might derive from differences in studies on generational barriers. On the other hand, the relationship between length of service may result from those unable to establish affective adhesion preferring to leave with only the highly committed making up the group with greatest length of service.

¹⁴ Starting from studies that analysed the association of several demographic, organizational or human resource variables with affective commitment, they showed that the latter variables presented the strongest and most consistent correlations. Moreover, studies that analysed the impact of some human resource policies on

This close relationship may be explained by bearing in mind that of all the distant variables, human resources strategies and practices have a major influence on near antecedents of affective commitment, this means influence over working experiences, workplace characteristics, definition of roles and the definition or modification of psychological contracts.

Assuming the potentially positive effects that some human resources practices may have on affective commitment, we can argue that it is probable that recruitment policies related with job security increase employee belief in the central organizational values. To this end, we can assume that this maintains and underpins reciprocity in the psychological contract through the employee obtaining satisfactory permanency in the organization. The employee takes on and/or respects organizational values, ensuring a level of affective commitment. This, consequently, increases the employee's desire to be part of that organization, which in turn generates some additional employee effort on behalf of the organization.

Recruitment strategies, through the incorporation of organizational values within the defined profile for new candidates, can increase core identification with the organization. Through selection, the company can offer a clear perception to new candidates about their importance and how they can make positive contributions¹⁵.

As regards compensation strategies, a redistributive policy connected to organizational income can increase affective commitment. This may also contribute towards a broader pool of candidates in selection processes thereby increasing the opportunity for alignment with core organizational values. In addition, high levels of compensation will be understood by employees as a sign of the value the company places on their effort, leading to feelings of personal importance and self-esteem. These feelings facilitate emotional adhesion and identification with the company. Redistribution linked to organizational income will increase positive perceptions from employees about internal equity and feelings of justice, aspects related to an increase in affective commitment.

Finally, we propose a positive relationship between company training policies and affective commitment given that such activities can serve to enhance feelings of self-esteem and personal importance and can be perceived as a valued investment

affective commitment (such as career management, socialization, outcome evaluation, work organization and participant management), generally assumed strong correlations (e.g. Buchanan, 1974; Bateman and Strasser, 1984; Mathieu and Zajac, 1990; Igbaria and Siegel, 1992; Shore, Barksdale and Shore, 1995; Ashforth and Saks, 1996; Meyer, Stanley, Herscovitch and Topolnytsky, 2002; and Bishop, Scott, Goldsby and Cropanzano, 2003).

¹⁵ As such, considering that demographic variables represent a low level of importance in developing this organizational commitment component, the intention to select and contract employees potentially predisposed to engage affectively is less effective than measures/activities designed to generate perceptions of organizational support or even human resources practices that seek to carefully manage co-worker experiences, organizational socialization practices, for example.

in a business mindset centred on human resources. Employees can respond to that investment with psychological adhesion and greater alignment with organizational values and goals (McElroy, 2001).

It should be stated that all these suggestions on the relationship between human resources policies and affective commitment are provisory in nature; they require further research before full validation may be affirmed.

Continuity commitment

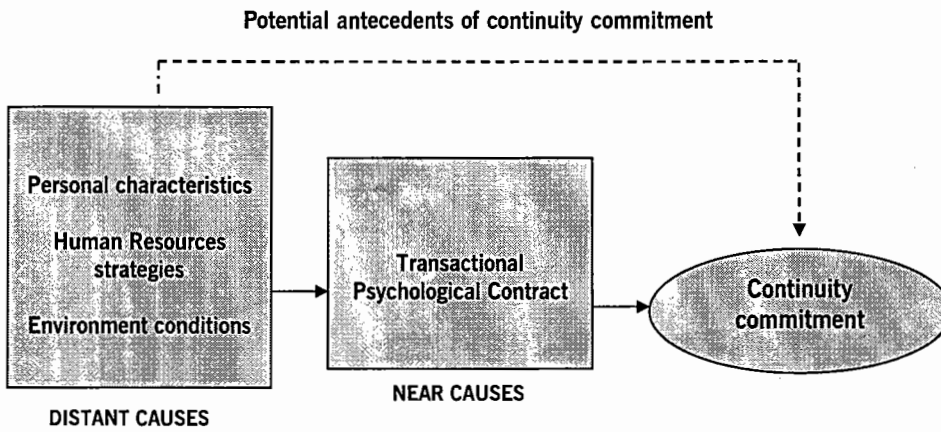
As previously referred to, this continuity commitment facet of organizational commitment relates to the situation where the employee recognizes the existence of costs associated with leaving the company. Any activity reflecting the investment that the employee will lose on leaving the organization and/or any other fact that reduces his/her expectations as regards job alternatives contributes towards developing continuity commitment.

The transactional psychological contract has come in for greatest consideration among the other near variables (Meyer and Allen, 1997, p.62) as it is based on principles of economic exchanges (Rousseau, 1989). From the distant antecedents we analysed *i)* certain environmental conditions that can affect employee perceptions on the existence of different employment opportunities, such as the prevailing general economic circumstances, those of the specific sector, and job market trends, among others; *ii)* certain employee personal characteristics can affect perceptions regarding his/her integration into the job market (expectations of finding suitable employment alternatives), including education level, knowledge competences (Meyer, Stanley, Herscovitch and Topolnytsky, 2002), family responsibilities, several personality traits (such as locus of control), age and length of service; *iii)* and human resources strategies, especially those requiring company investment, such as training policies, employment security, redistributive compensation as all retain the potential to affect the employee cost perception towards leaving the organization. Figure 3 details this approach.

Some aspects of these antecedent variables can be analysed. The results regarding age and length of service are ambiguous. This is because as an individual increases these two variables, he/she acquires experience and skills that may be considered valuable to other organizations. This may modify employee perceptions of employment options and lead to diminished continuity commitment. However, in later career phases, the cost of abandoning the company increases (status, acquired rights and level of earnings), which may increase continuity commitment.

Relating continuity commitment with human resources management strategies, we may infer that training policies oriented towards developing specific skills can reinforce continuity commitment. However, training policies focusing on

FIGURE 3



easily transferable general skills do not generate such effects given their extendable and applicable nature should the employee move on to another company.

Employment security policies are equally taken as a strategy for improving continuity commitment given that when leaving the company the employee gives up a secure job relationship that may not be present in the new job context (McElroy, 2001). The same argument can be used to explain a potential positive relationship between continuity commitment and social benefits along with other redistributive aspects linked with permanence in organization, such as length of service rewards.

Normative commitment

Normative commitment - that is a theoretical and practical understanding of its development essentially through the relational psychological contract¹⁶ - has looked at the values and expectations generated by the early socialization processes from the family and society onwards (Wiener, 1982; Meyer, Allen and Smith, 1993; Morrow, 1993; Wasti, 1999; and Clugston, Howell and Dorfman, 2000). Basically in these socialization processes, values, norms and feelings of obligation and reciprocity are transmitted and are subsequently present in individual conduct and reflected in employee formulation of relational psychological contracts.

There is also a possibility that normative commitment can be established through activities undertaken by the company. In this way, positive experiences of the socialization process, actions undertaken by a company requiring individual

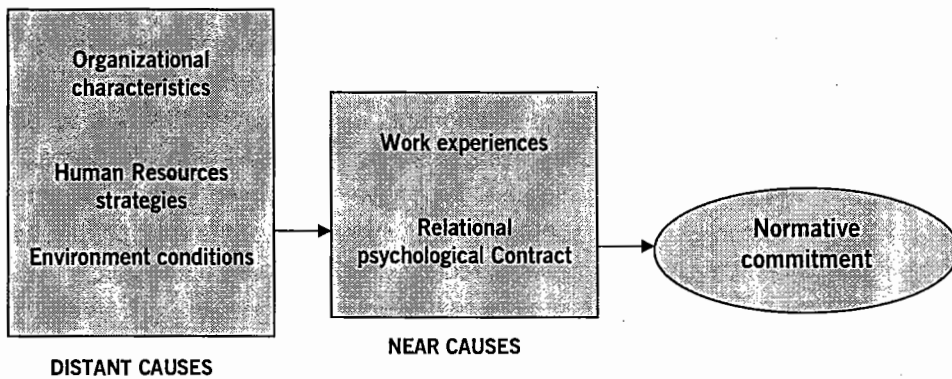
¹⁶ Relational psychological contracts are distinct from transactional psychological contracts because they are more abstract and based on social network exchange principles (Rousseau, 1989).

input from which they gain a feeling of obligation towards their organization, for example, employment security politics in periods of downsizing, training initiatives provided free to employees (McElroy, 2001), are capable of generating a certain influence in this organizational commitment component (Meyer, Allen and Topolnytsky, 1998).

In these cases, and according to principles of reciprocity, when a company makes an extended investment and the employee understands this as genuinely to his/her own good, he/she will perceive an imbalance and will seek to correct that subsequently, developing a feeling of obligation towards the company. However, how an individual assumes reciprocity norms is conditioned by his personal values and the respective socialization process (family and society). The existence of such values will mediate the degree of obligation from the individual to the company¹⁷. This relationship is set out in Figure 4.

FIGURE 4

Potential antecedents of normative commitment



CONCLUSIONS

Even at the theoretical level, such as business practice, organizational commitment has been considered a relevant variable to companies especially because it enables the identification of individual behaviours and intentions that

¹⁷ The first individual socialization process, developed within family and society, defines perceptions about obligations and normal behaviour that the individual must assume in dealing with other individuals and social structures. Obviously, each family or society defines their own levels of norms and we can assume that individuals will be different when judging different actions within their company. In this way, the same activity can be considered by some collaborators as a feeling of duty while other collaborators might see it as an investment from the company, subsequently generating differing obligation perception levels.

have a direct impact on organizational efficacy and productivity (Hunt and Morgan, 1994, p.1570).

To render this concept operational and susceptible to intervention by human resources managers, we defined its components and its influential factors. A review of the literature demonstrates that despite the range of theoretical proposals, it is possible to establish parallelism between several components of organizational commitment, which enables comparison and its application as a tool in empirical research and business management.

For example, the theoretical literature confirms that affective, normative and continuity commitment, according to the Meyer and Allen model, maintain significant levels of association with cognitive variables in the leaving process, such as the intention to leave the company or look for a new job. Continuity commitment seems important in reducing/stopping employee rotation and departure. It also makes it clear that affective commitment, and to a lesser degree normative commitment, have important positive implications for task performance while continuity commitment has positive and negative relations with that variable.

The existence of such correlations explains the importance of human resources managers incorporating organizational commitment antecedents into their management strategies. We conclude that human resources managers will gain several advantages if they identify the commitment profile they wish for their members of staff, that is to say the components and the levels that should be taken into account in human resources management policies. In this case, the company must promote certain levels of affective and normative commitment when seeking to obtain major outcomes and productivity, and should only promote continuity commitment when the company needs to reduce voluntary levels of rotation.

At the same time, human resources managers should evaluate the intensity of real psychological connections between employees and the company in order to determine possible discrepancies between real and desired levels of the three organizational commitment components that would require specific strategies to resolve them.

Initial steps in developing this field involve fostering the commitment profile of each collaborator with one or many of the theoretical models referred to. For example, a company could apply Meyer and Allen questionnaires in order to identify affective, normative and continuity commitment levels, and they could measure degrees of identification and internalization as proposed by O'Reilly, Chatman and Cladwell and/or the affective and moral commitment as proposed by Jaros, Jermier, Koehler and Sincich to obtain additional information about company organizational commitment, its bases, and specific nature. Thus, having recognized any existing shortcomings in the fields of affective, normative and continuity commitment, the business can take action as required to resolve such failings by targeting each known antecedent component.

It is important to emphasize that organizational commitment management is not linear and presents several difficulties regarding human resources practices. For example, while length of service promotion policies increase continuity commitment, it can be argued that they reduce affective commitment via their impact on employee perception on company equity. Another example is training policies. On the one hand, they can positively affect affective commitment but may also bring about negative effects for continuity commitment by raising individual employee perceptions about employment alternatives.

Joint analysis of differing organizational commitment antecedents may generate relevant correlations. First, the elements of organizational commitment are created and developed according to their own mechanisms and this is reflected in the differing natures of affective, normative and continuity commitment. Thus, it becomes important to emphasize that normative commitment, unlike affective and continuity commitment, develops prior to joining a new company, but the other two components develop in response to different experiences within a specific organization (Beck and Wilson, 2001).

Secondly, studies seem to confirm the relevance of human resources strategies as a significant antecedent of affective, normative and continuity commitment. This enables us to state that:

- i) when focusing on normative commitment, companies need to have undertaken prior action because this component is pre-developed when an individual joins a company;
- ii) affective commitment can be increased through the implementation of several actions that facilitate the transmission, knowledge and acceptance of company values in addition to extending and enabling positive experiences that facilitate internal equity perception, to increase and reinforce the psychological contract with employees.
There are several strategies and activities that a company can resort to. They include, but are not restricted to, participative leadership, transparency in problem and conflict resolution, training programs, mentoring activities, rewards programs, social benefits systems, internal recruitment strategies, promotion based on redistribution and skills, long-term contractual policies, selection programs that consider characteristics such as auto-efficacy and internal locus of control, and intensive socialization systems to transmit values and reduce ambiguity and role conflict.
- iii) a major level of continuity commitment can be increased by human resources management targeting work groups core to company activities and productivity. This may be achieved through specific training programs to enhance their perception of loss when leaving the company. Of the range of means available, we would emphasize working in groups,

redistribution of a social character, high levels of redistribution regarding market performance and length of service rewards, job security policies, internal recruitment strategies, long-term contractual policies, internal length of service promotion, and specific training programs.

Hence, knowledge of the connection between organizational commitment intervention and antecedent variables enables human resources management to act more efficiently and specifically focus on those levels considered relevant to and in accordance with their own priorities and objectives.

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