Editorial

Advances in workplace commitments: Introduction to the special issue

1. Introduction

This special issue features five articles that emerged from the second Conference on Commitment hosted at The Ohio State University’s Fisher College of Business in Columbus, Ohio in November 2010. The goals for this conference were to a) bring together a community of scholars interested in the phenomenon of commitment to share and discuss ideas and findings, b) advance the literature by promoting leading-edge thinking on all aspects of commitment in organizational contexts, and c) promote opportunities for informal interaction and dialog among attendees to facilitate networking, collaboration, and the sharing of ideas.

2. Why commitment?

Why a conference and special issue on commitment given recent articles questioning the value of the commitment construct—articles implying the construct is redundant (e.g., Harrison, Newman, & Roth, 2006; Le, Schmidt, Harter, & Lauver, 2010) and irrelevant (e.g., Baruch, 1998; Cappelli, 2000)? In short, because counter to these assertions, commitment has become more, not less, important (Meyer, 2009). Criticisms that commitment has become irrelevant tend to equate commitment with organizational commitment. This is understandable since the term commitment for the past 60 years has largely referred to commitment to one’s employing organization. And 60 years ago, when most individuals were permanent employees who spent their entire careers with a single company, the employing organization was the most relevant target. Yet that is often not the case today because of changes to the nature of work, organizations, and the employment relationship. Furthermore, research has examined commitment to dozens of other targets within and outside of the workplace (Klein, forthcoming).

Commitment is more, not less, relevant today because organizations need a committed workforce more than ever. The difference is that today, commitment to the employing organization (which may or may not be the organization for which one works) is often not the most critical commitment target. Depending on the situation, commitment to goals, teams, projects, career, or values may be more important to the organization and/or the employee. Criticisms that commitment is redundant are based on the empirical overlap between some measures of commitment and measures of related constructs such as satisfaction and identification. Although some measures, and even prior conceptual definitions, of commitment are confounded, that need not be the case (Klein, Molloy, Cooper, & Swanson, 2011), and there are distinct aspects of the commitment construct that make it valuable and unique in understanding, predicting, and influencing behavior in organizations (Klein, Molloy, & Brinsfield, 2012). With apologies to Mark Twain, Monty Python, and Hall (1996), reports of commitment’s death are an exaggeration, and commitment theory and research are getting better—long live commitment.

Counter to proclamations of its demise, commitment research is alive and well, and is poised to benefit from many exciting conceptual and methodological advances (Becker, Klein, & Meyer, 2009). A lot has happened in the commitment literature (e.g., Klein, Becker, & Meyer, 2009), and the workplace (e.g., Cappelli & Keller, in press), since the last special issue of Human Resource Management Review on work commitment (Morrow, 2001). As was the case then, commitment, though often viewed as an organizational behavior topic, is central to Human Resource Management. Most if not all Human Resource (HR) practices have the purpose, implicitly or explicitly, of affecting commitment because of commitment’s role in determining important individual outcomes, including job attitudes, motivation, performance, and retention (Becker et al., 2009). Implications of individuals’ commitments have also been explicated for team and small group outcomes (Bishop, Scott, & Burroughs, 2000), and macro-HR scholars have clarified how high-performance HR practices influence individuals’ commitments (Kehoe & Wright, 2010). Moreover, HR and commitment scholars can make important contributions to strategic management microfoundation scholarship, which seeks to identify the origins of superior organizational performance (Coff & Kryscynski, 2011). Human capital has been identified as
a microfoundation, but an untapped area of inquiry is how human capital and commitment interact to influence vital micro outcomes and organizational outcomes (Molloy, Ployhart, & Wright, 2011).

3. Conference overview

Seeking to repeat or exceed the success of the first Conference on Commitment, held in 2005, was a daunting challenge. When the call for papers went out in November of 2009, cuts in many university travel budgets during the great recession created further uncertainty—and did prevent some from submitting and attending. Yet the response in terms of both submissions and attendance was strong. The conference was a mix of invited (30%) and peer reviewed (70%) presentations, with reviews conducted by a twelve person program committee (Thomas E. Becker, University of Delaware; James Bishop, New Mexico State University; Aaron Cohen, University of Haifa; Roderick D. Iverson, Simon Fraser University; Howard J. Klein (Chair), The Ohio State University; John P. Meyer, University of Western Ontario; Paula C. Morrow, Iowa State University; Lyman W. Porter, University of California, Irvine; Robert J. Vandenberg, University of Georgia; Christian Vandenberghe, HEC Montréal; S. Arzu Wasti, Sabanci University). There were 23 sessions on the conference program, with authors representing 11 different countries (31% from outside North America). Sixty-five researchers attended the conference.

The content of the conference program reflected the evolving state of commitment research. The sessions focused on the nature of commitment and its measurement, temporal changes in commitment over time, cultural influences on commitment, commitments in alternative work arrangements, and the effects of commitments on both in-role and extra-role performance. The main themes that emerged during the conference, many of which are reflected in the articles that make up this special issue, were temporality, culture, the changing employment relationship, and methodological innovations. In addition to the many excellent presentations, there was great discussion at and between sessions. An inclusive and supportive environment was created thanks to collegial and constructive comments, and attendees and presenters alike being open to dialog rather than aggressively defending their ideas and attacking the work of others. Consistent with the goals of the conference, more research was likely initiated than presented.

4. Overview of the special issue

After the conference, the program committee nominated individuals responsible for the best presentations and ideas from the conference to contribute to this special issue. Appearing on the conference program was not a prerequisite nor did it ensure an authorship opportunity. Not all who were invited to submit a paper for this issue chose to do so. In some cases, this was because there was no paper corresponding to the ideas expressed or presented (e.g., the fascinating panel discussion on employee authorship opportunity. Not all who were invited to submit a paper for this issue chose to do so. In some cases, this was because conference to contribute to this special issue. Appearing on the conference program was not a prerequisite nor did it ensure an extra-role performance. The main themes that emerged during the conference, many of which are reflected in the articles that make up this special issue, were temporality, culture, the changing employment relationship, and methodological innovations. In addition to the many excellent presentations, there was great discussion at and between sessions. An inclusive and supportive environment was created thanks to collegial and constructive comments, and attendees and presenters alike being open to dialog rather than aggressively defending their ideas and attacking the work of others. Consistent with the goals of the conference, more research was likely initiated than presented.

The collection of articles in this special issue, thus reflect ideas nominated as being among the best of the conference, papers subsequently submitted by the authors, and manuscripts which survived and were strengthened by the review process. As a set, these articles highlight the vibrant and exciting new directions being explored by commitment researchers. Specifically, these papers highlight advances in the development and variability of commitment over time, commitment targets, and the unique insights of taking a person, rather than a variable centered approach. Most, if not all of these articles, challenge or relax previous assumptions in order to better reflect the important role commitment can play in helping organizations gain and sustain a competitive advantage through human resource management.

The first article, by Becker, Ullrich, and van Dick, introduces the concept of within-person variation in commitment (WPVC) to direct research attention toward intraindividual changes in commitment. This paper importantly addresses the flawed assumption that commitment is largely a stable construct and draws upon Affective Events Theory to present a model of within-person variation in affective commitment to teams. Consideration of within person variations in commitment, and the influences on that variation, yields a number of new research questions and Becker et al. argue that recognizing the dynamic nature of commitment and considering both level and variation in commitment will enhance the prediction of key workplace behaviors.

Next, the article by Bergman, Benzer, Kabins, Bhupatkar, and Panina also looks at the role of events, in this case, how commitment develops through values that are activated by organizational events. This article proposes that event-by-event experiences inform individuals about their fit with the organization (or other potential commitment targets), based on their values. Individual differences in value hierarchies are proposed to account for both how commitment develops over time within person as well as how exposure to the same events can result in different between-person levels of commitment.

The Breitsohl and Ruhle article relaxes another commonly held assumption—that commitment to an organization ends when one leaves that organization. The concept of residual commitment is introduced to reflect commitment to previous organizations that remains even after joining a new organization. The article presents a model of how residual commitment is formed as well as the interplay between residual and current affective organizational commitment. The interrelationships among these overlapping commitments are important given the increasing frequency with which individuals now change organizations.
The fourth article, by Bingham, Mitchell, Bishop, and Allen, introduces a new commitment target—organization-sponsored causes. These authors explicate commitment to an organization-sponsored cause separately from commitment to the cause itself or the organization. Bingham et al. also draw upon the theory of planned behavior and corporate volunteerism literature to explain the effects of commitment to organization-sponsored causes. The interrelationships among commitment to the organization-sponsored cause, employees’ behavioral support for the cause, and organizational commitment are also explored.

Finally, the article by Meyer, Stanley, and Vandenberg demonstrates how taking a person-centered approach can provide new insights into the nature and implications of commitment. Unlike the traditional variable-centered approach, a person centered approach does not assume that research samples are homogeneous but that samples can contain subgroups and that varying combinations of variables of interest (e.g., commitment targets or mindsets) are experienced and/or related to important outcomes differently within these subgroups. The person-centered approach complements the variable-centered approach in that it can be used to address different research questions and takes advantage of advanced analytic procedures (e.g., latent profile analysis).

5. Conclusion

You may not agree with all of the ideas presented in these five papers. Not everything in these articles is consistent with my own thinking about the nature and operation of commitment—that was not a prerequisite for inclusion. A key goal of the Commitment Conference, and similarly for this special issue, is to introduce new perspectives and ideas into the literature. There clearly are differing views regarding the optimal nature of scientific inquiry and debate, but in my opinion, new perspectives need to be introduced into the literature before they can be systematically and independently evaluated. The most innovative companies in many industries today do not wait until they have perfected a product before bringing it to the market. Rather, they put it out there and then improve and refine the product based on the reactions and feedback received. Each of the articles in this special issue presents multiple ideas to be reacted to, tested, and further refined. By advancing our understanding of workplace commitments, we can learn how to better utilize HR practices to influence commitment to the targets that matter most in a given situation to maximize key individual and team outcomes and, in doing so, leverage human capital to yield superior organizational outcomes.

I would like to thank the conference program committee, attendees, presenters, and all of the students and staff who helped make the 2010 Conference on Commitment a success. Large conferences put on by professional associations serve a valuable role in advancing scholarship and professional networking, but I have found small, focused conferences to be even more valuable. If you have any interests related to commitment, or workplace attachments in general, I encourage you to consider submitting your work to the next Conference on Commitment. If your interests lie elsewhere, and there is not currently a focused conference on that topic, I would encourage you to plan one. I would also like to thank the reviewers for the special issue of this journal, and the authors for their patience and willingness to further develop their papers. These articles outline some of the many exciting new areas for commitment research and I look forward to seeing future works test the ideas put forth in these articles and other advances in workplace commitments. Long live commitment!

References


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