

# The impact of HR practices on employee normative, affective and continuance commitment.

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## **Abstract**

A quantitative survey with 164 employees of a town hall in Switzerland reveals that only 35 HR practices out of 150 are linked to employee commitment. HR practices are more linked to normative commitment than to affective or continuance commitment. Normative commitment depends on employees' job and work relations, and to indirect compensation. Affective commitment also depends on the job and work relations, and on vertical communication, but not on indirect compensation. Continuation commitment is negatively linked to hiring, performance management and work place. Performance management, training & development and career have no positive impact. Our results complement research but also differ from other studies since HR practices' impact on commitment depends on the organizational activity/business and culture as well as on local culture.

## **Employee commitment**

Employee commitment is a psychological state that describes the link between an individual and his/her organization (Meyer & Allen, 1991), it is an emotional attachment (Mowday, Porter, & Steers, 1982) or a moral obligation (Wiener, 1982). Meyer and Allen (1991) have identified 3 components of commitment:

- Affective or emotional commitment, which involves an attachment to the organization (I wish to stay);
- Continuance (or calculated) commitment, which is linked to perceived costs in case of loss the activity (I loose if I leave);
- Normative commitment, a feeling of reciprocity an individual develops towards its employer (I feel morally obliged to stay).

Affective commitment develops when there is a good adequacy between employee competencies and organization expectancies. It is linked to work experiences. Continuance commitment takes place when the individual assesses that opportunities given to him/her (career, salary, other benefits) are superior to those offered elsewhere. It is linked to the external environment. Normative commitment depends either on individual values or on the organizational culture about employee-employer reciprocity. It is linked to sense of duty. Affective and normative commitments are endogenous while continuance commitment is exogenous (Bietry, 2012).

Meyer and Allen's definition of employee commitment has been criticized. Commitment would be voluntary and not compulsory (Klein, Molloy, & Brinsfield, 2012). Continuance commitment would be composed of 2 distinct dimensions, one linked to the comparative benefits that the individual has, the other one to the lack of alternatives perceived by the individual (McGee & Ford, 1987; Meyer, Stanley, Herscovitch, & Topolnytsky, 2002). Continuance commitment would thus be either due to what one has acquired or invested, or to the feeling of being trapped (lack of alternatives), two situations which are indeed different and which could be treated separately.

For some, normative commitment would be a predisposition to affective commitment (Cohen, 2007) and not a different construct. Normative commitment would not be universal but dependent on the cultural context, being more present in collectivist cultures (Fischer & Mansell, 2009) while continuance commitment would be more present in North American cultures (Wasti, 2005).

Employee commitment is subject to many discussions but remains a key HR subject as it is linked to employee performance, satisfaction, motivation, and turnover (Meyer et al., 2002).

### **HR practices and employee commitment**

HR practices that have an impact on commitment are mainly performance management, training and development, career and mobility, and employment conditions (including compensation). Only a few HR practices (performance, development, career) have been studied against Meyer and Allen's 3 dimensions. Other HR practices were studied against commitment in general or motivation (Jiang, Lepak, Hu & Baer, 2012).

**Performance management** is positively linked to affective commitment, and negatively linked to continuance commitment (Meyer, Paunonen, Gellatly, Goffin, & Jackson, 1989). Meyer and Smith (2000) found that **training and development** is perceived either as a support from the organization, - support which fosters affective commitment-, or as a benefit for which one has to give a reciprocity (normative commitment), or as an investment which would be costly to abandon (continuance commitment). Others have found links between development practices and affective commitment (Bal, Kooij, & De Jong, 2013), in particular mentoring (Payne & Huffman, 2005). **Career and mobility** is linked to affective commitment (Meyer et al., 1989). Links between employment conditions and the 3 types of employee commitments were not found in our review of literature.

Some posit that HR practices influence several commitment types in the same time (Gellatly, Hunter, Currie, & Irving, 2009). For them, development practices are linked to either high affective commitment and low continuance commitment (what the authors call "emotional commitment"), or to high affective and high continuance commitments (what the authors call being "devoted"). Development practices also reduce low affective and high continuance commitments (being "trapped") or low affective and low continuance commitments (being "disengaged").

Employee commitment also depends on employee **perceptions**, in particular regarding HR practices' conformity with laws (Koys, 1991), or about organizational climate (Glisson & James, 2002). The impact of HR practices also depends on the leader's style (Doucet, Simard, & Tremblay, 2007), the organizational culture and the environment in general.

Research on HR practices and employee commitment is limited, in particular against affective, normative and continuance commitment. This is why we wanted to study the subject.

## Methods

A Swiss public administration gave us the assignment to do an employee satisfaction survey about its HR services. The administration authorized us to add Meyer and Allen's (1991) questions on employee commitment. A questionnaire with 150 questions was sent by email to all the employees. It included questions on satisfaction about all HR processes (hiring, performance management, staff training and development, career, compensation, internal communication, customized employment conditions). There were also 6 questions about employee affective commitment (e.g.: "I don't feel that I strongly belong to the organization"), 6 questions about continuance commitment (e.g.; I don't think that I have enough opportunities elsewhere"), and 6 questions on normative commitment (e.g.; "I don't feel that I have the right to leave the organization, even if it were beneficial to me").

Response rate was 41% on a total population of 397, which is a good result, given that the questionnaire took about 1 hour to be filled. The employee sample has the same characteristics than the entire population (age, proportion of male and females in particular). Respondents are 66% male, 26% are 24-35 years old, 34% are 36-45 years old, 26% are 46-55 years old, 8% over (8% of no answers). 67% are employees, 28% are managers (5% did not answer). Employee tenure is: 37% less than 5 years, 27% 5-10 years, 15% 11-20 years, 12% 21-30 years, 1% over 30 years (7% did not answer).

The public administration is the town hall of a mid-sized city in Switzerland. It is in charge of all standard public services such as city cleaning, gardens, civic rights and obligations, population management, police, culture, tourism, etc.

## Results

Overall, 35 HR practices (out of 150) have an impact on employee commitment (table 1)

**Table 1 – Correlations between HR practices and employee commitment**

<b>Correlations between HR practices and <i>continuance</i> commitment</b>	
Can you say that all your work was considered during the performance assessment meeting ?	-.190
Are you satisfied with the process of performance assessment meetings ?	-.175
Are you satisfied with your work place / environment (overall context, rumour, temperature, ...)?	-.169
The process for your recruitment meeting was well prepared	-.157

**Tableau 2 – Correlations between HR practices and employee commitment**

<b>Correlation between HR practices and <i>normative</i> commitment</b>	
Are you satisfied with the way conflicts are managed in your service/unit?	.349
Are you satisfied with the work climate (ambiance) in your service/unit?	.269
Do you think that indirect compensation (perks, allowances) is somehow superior than that in other organizations?	.262
Do you think that your responsibilities/tasks are clear?	.255
Do you feel to be heard in case of conflict?	.252
Do you feel to be informed about Senior Management's challenges/what is at stake?	.229
Are tasks/responsibilities equitably distributed?	.226
Senior Management takes your opinion into account.	.225
Did you feel welcomed when you took your new post ?	.220
Professional mobility is strong in your organization.	.219
Are relations with your supervisor good ?	.214
Was the induction to your new post well planned ?	.213
Interests of employees are well represented with Senior Management.	.212
Are you satisfied with the autonomy you have in your work ?	.192
How do you find the overall work ambiance in your organization ?	.185
Are you happy with indirect compensation ?	.182
Did it ever happen to you that you had an important over-workload due to the departure of a colleague ?	-.180
Are relations with your colleagues in your service/unit good ?	.179
Do you find sources of satisfaction and motivation in your work ?	.175
Are you satisfied with your work place/environment (context, rumour, temperature,...)	.174
Does your direct supervisor show recognition for your work ?	.167
Are relations with your team members good ?	.161
Are you satisfied with the communication channels (mails, meetings, ..) with your superiors ?	.156
<b>Correlations between HR practices and <i>affective</i> commitment</b>	
Do you feel to be informed about Senior Management priorities/challenges ?	.261
Do you feel that the overall work ambiance in your organization is good ?	.229
Interests of employees are well represented with Senior Management.	.225
Are you satisfied with the autonomy you have in your work ?	.208
Do you find sources of satisfaction and motivation in your work ?	.190
Do you easily transmit information or suggestions to your superiors ?	.176
Globally, is your workload high ?	.168
Are tasks/responsibilities in your service/unit clear ?	.158

Note : All correlations are significant at  $p < .05$

A synthesis of the above results leads to the following table:

**Table 3 – Main HR practices having an impact on employee commitment**

Type of employee commitment (number of linked HR practices)	Main HR practices		
Continuance commitment (4)	Bad performance management	Bad work place	Bad recruitment
Normative commitment (23)	Relations with colleagues and management	Indirect compensation	Work (clear, well distributed, autonomy, satisfaction)
Affective commitment (8)	Relations with colleagues and management	Work (autonomy, satisfaction, high, clear)	

### Discussion

Our first observation is that there are not many HR practices that are linked to employee commitment. Only 35 out of 150 of them matter. This means that while many HR activities are useful, in particular for people administration, most of them do not improve commitment. Our second observation is that there are much more HR practices that are linked to normative commitment (23) than to affective commitment (8) and continuation commitment (4). This means that HR activities, at least those with the public administration we surveyed, impact more feeling of reciprocity than affective or continuation commitment. This is due to the HR practices themselves, but also probably to the organizational activities (public service, citizen's rights and obligations) and consequent culture (fairness and duty for instance) as well as to the local culture (work is a good think one has to respect, employment is a fair exchange process between employees and the employer).

Normative commitment is mainly linked to ability to manage conflicts, a good work ambiance and to indirect compensation (perks, allowances). It is also linked to clear and good allocation of responsibilities and good vertical communication. Induction, mobility, autonomy, job satisfaction and recognition also matter but to a lesser extent. Normative commitment therefore mainly depends on good work relations with both colleagues and management, perks and allowances, and to a motivating job, that is clear, well distributed and autonomous.

Affective commitment is rather similar to normative commitment but it does not depend on indirect compensation. Money does not influence desire to stay, at least in the public sector organization we surveyed. Affective commitment does not depend on a well distributed work, which is the case for normative commitment. It depends more on autonomy than with normative commitment. In a nutshell, affective commitment depends on relations and quality of work. We also note that having a lot to do (high workload) for something that one is happy with is linked to commitment. Finally, it appears that normative and affective commitment are linked to rather similar HR practices, which may indicate that they overlap, as it has already being said (Meyer et al., 2002).

Continuance commitment is linked to a bad performance management process, a bad work place and a bad recruitment. Those who feel obliged to stay are unhappy with the way their performance is managed. This may mean that their performance is not well assessed, implying that it is poor or not well understood. Employees with a poor performance normally don't stay in the private sector. It is probable that our survey with the private sector would have not identified this element. Perhaps related to their frustration with performance management, those who feel obliged to stay think that their work environment is not satisfactory. Finally, those who feel obliged to stay think that they were badly recruited, which refers to a lack of recognition of their competencies. Again, the same survey with the private sectors may not have revealed such results given that “inadequate employees” cannot stay employed.

Compared to the literature we collected (this is a selection which is not exhaustive), our findings are mapped as follows:

**Table 4: Results from our study (in red colour below) against selected researches on HR practices and employee commitment**

HR practices	Normative commitment	Affective commitment	Continuation commitment	Commitment (overall)
Hiring		Koij et al. (2010)	Study : NEG relation	
Performance management		Performance assessment, : Meyer et al. (1989)	Study : NEG Meyer et al. (1989) : NEG	Performance assessment :Meyer et al. (1989); Ogilvie (1986) Performance recognition : Chew & Chan (2008)
Training & development	Meyer & Smith (2000)	Meyer & Smith (2000) ; Bal, Kooij, & De Jong (2013); Payne & Huffman (2005); Koij et al. 2010	Meyer & Smith (2000)	Harel & Tzafrir (1999); Luthans et al. (2008); Meyer & Smith (2000), Chew & Chan (2008), Hakanen et al. (2006); Schaufeli & Salanova (2007); Xanthopoulou et al. (2009b); Lyons & Schneider (2009)
Career & mobility		Meyer et al. (1989) Koij et al. (2010)		Chang (1999); Gaertner & Nollen (1989); Paul & Anantharaman (2004)
Work	Study (clear, well distributed, autonomy) Job satisfaction (Aydogdu & Asikgil, 2011)	Study (autonomy, motivating, high, clear) Work experiences (Meyer et al., 2002) Autonomy (Galletta et al. 2011) Job satisfaction (Aydogdu & Asikgil, 2011)	Job satisfaction (Aydogdu & Asikgil, 2011)	
Work place (rumor, temperature)			Study : NEG relation	
Work relations	Study	Study		
Communication		Study (vertical) Information sharing : Koij et al. 2010		Lawler (1986); Gumming (1992); Rodger (1995)
Employment conditions				Powell & Meyer (2004)
Compensation	Study (indirect compensation)	Rewards : Koij et al. (2010)		Luchak & Gellatly (2001); Mottaz (1988); Paul & Anantharaman (2004); Meyer & Smith (2000); Pfeffer (1998); Ward & Davis (1995); Weitzman & Kruse (1990)
Flexible working hours		Koij et al., (2010)		Scandura & Lankau (1997)
Security				Gaertner & Nollen (1989); Chang (1999); Harley (2002)
Participation to decisions				Allen, Shore, & Griffeth (2003)

Some of our findings confirm other researches, some others are new, and some other researches found elements that we have not found.

First, we observe that **other** studies found a link between training & development and normative commitment, affective commitment, and continuation commitment, and commitment overall. We do not find any such link. It is the same for career & mobility which others found to be linked with affective commitment or commitment overall. If HR practices related to training & development or career do not come out in our research, it is probably due to the fact that these are simply not or not much provided in the town hall studied. Indeed, training is rather limited and career opportunities are scarce. This is why people did not view these HR practices as important for them. We do not find positive links between performance management and affective commitment as Meyer et al. (1989) found. This is probably due to the fact that performance management simply does not happen in the town hall surveyed, or that when it does, it is only seen as an administrative burden that has no impact on career (which is anyway scarce in the town hall), or compensation (which is fixed in the public service, without bonuses). Ways to recognise performance being weak, and ways to manage under-performance being limited, performance management does not come out as a significant practice for commitment in the public sector we surveyed. Employment conditions do not appear in our findings as a significant HR practice because, we think, public service employment conditions are usually good in Switzerland, without being exceptional. This is perhaps why this element does not come out as being significant. We do not find items related to job security since we did not ask any question about this. Flexible working hours did not come as significant since many employees do not benefit from them (gardeners, cleaners, most of the blue collars). Participation to the decisions did not come out as significant but vertical communication did. People from our study want to be consulted but not necessarily included in the decisions. This difference with other research may be due to the local or organizational/professional culture.

Some of our findings are **new or more specific** vis-à-vis other researches. We find that clear, well distributed and motivating work as well as autonomy lead to normative and affective commitment, but these elements do not matter the same against each type of commitment. Our findings are in line with other research about the link between job satisfaction and the 3 types of commitment (Aydogdu & Asikgil, 2011), but more detailed as we say what the specific causes of job satisfaction are (clear, well distributed work, satisfaction, autonomy, high workload). Another element we have not found in our review of literature is work relations. Horizontal and vertical work relations are linked to normative and affective commitment. These elements are not isolated in the literature we reviewed, but included in either job satisfaction or work experiences.

We also find elements that are **similar** to literature but which are **more specific**. Performance management is negatively linked to continuation commitment as others have found. We find that compensation is linked to commitment but in particular to normative commitment. Our study enables to precise more what type of commitment is linked to compensation. We find that only indirect compensation (perks, allowances) lead to normative commitment. This means that basic salary has no specific impact on commitment, but that extra money does. Perks and allowance lead to sense of duty / reciprocity. We find that salary does not matter, which may be due to the fact that public service employees are decently paid in Switzerland, in the average. Salary is probably found to be sufficient, without being exceptional. It does not come out as an important factor. Furthermore, it is usually agreed that salary is not the main motivation factor for public service employees who often value more the organizational missions than compensation. Compensation therefore does not seem to matter in the public sector we analysed, except indirect compensation which is linked to sense of duty / reciprocity. It is for sure that surveys with private sector organizations would lead to different results.

We find that communication is linked to commitment, as other authors have found, but our findings are a bit more specific. We find that only vertical communication is linked to affective commitment. Our study reveals that ability to convey messages to senior management and to be informed by them is key for employees to be willing to stay in the organization.

Reading the above table by column, we find that normative commitment is due to work/responsibilities, work relations and indirect compensation. Training & development does not appear in our list. Affective commitment is due to work/responsibilities, work relations and vertical communication. We do not find any element related to performance assessment, training & development or career as others have found. Continuation commitment is due to a bad hiring, a bad performance management and a bad work place. We do not find elements related to training & development.

## **Conclusion**

HR practices do not matter much for employee commitment. Only 35 out of the 150 we analysed are significant. HR practices that matter are mainly linked to normative commitment in the public sector organization we surveyed. Employee normative commitment depends on employees' job and work relations, and to indirect compensation. Affective commitment depends also on the job, and work relations, but also on vertical communication and not on indirect compensation. Continuation commitment is negatively linked to hiring, performance management and work place. We therefore find that employee commitment mainly comes from the job content and relations, not from direct compensation, a good performance management process, or from training & development, as others have found. This is due to the fact that the public sector we surveyed provides less opportunities for career, training & development than the private sector or other organizations studied in literature. Affective commitment is perhaps the most powerful type of employee psychological state for the organization, as it is linked to the desire to stay, not to a duty or a lack of alternatives. Our findings show that affective commitment is due to the job given, but also to relations with colleagues and ability to communicate with management, including senior management. Organizations (of the public sector at least) that are willing to increase employee commitment should focus on these elements. In particular, much attention should be given to a good work atmosphere and vertical communication. Leaders play a key role in this process since they are the communication link with senior management and since they are in charge of a good work environment for their teams. Commitment, as far as we can find in this research, therefore seems to depend on managers' ability to provide a harmonious and connected work environment. Our study also shows that the link between HR practices and commitment is context specific. It depends on the organization's missions and culture but also on the local culture and institutions. Employee commitment does not seem to depend on one universal set of HR practices. We however hope to bring new and more specific elements through this study.



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