

Perceived Organizational Support: Linking Human Resource Management Practices with Affective Organizational Commitment, Professional Commitment and Turnover Intention

Lew Tek Yew

*School of Business,
Curtin University of Technology Sarawak Campus Malaysia
lew.tek.yew@curtin.edu.my*

Abstract

The main objective of this conceptual paper is to examine the role of perceived organizational support (POS) to link the four (4) human resource management practices namely pay satisfaction, career development opportunities, work/family support and leader-member exchange and affective organizational commitment, professional commitment and turnover intention of faculty members working for private higher education institutions in Malaysia. This paper will mainly be driven theoretically by the social exchange theory, the concept of perceived organizational support (POS) which is the commitment of the organization to the employee, the norm of reciprocity, the organizational support theory as well as the other relevant literature in the human resource management and organizational behaviour research. This paper contributes to the limited body of knowledge about the psychological processes underlying the formation of organizational commitment through the perspectives of the social exchange theory (Blau, 1964) and the organizational support theory (Eisenberger, et al., 1986; Eisenberger et al., 2001).

Keywords: *Perceived Organizational Support, human resource management, affective organizational commitment, professional commitment, turnover intention.*

INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

Social exchange theory (Blau, 1964) suggests that the exchange relationship between two parties often goes beyond economic exchange and includes social exchange. Hence, organizational studies argue that employer and employee exchange not only impersonal resources such as money, but also socioemotional resources such as approval, respect, recognition and support (Eisenberger, Armeli, Rexwinkel, Lynch, & Rhoades, 2001). In organizational researches, the social exchange theory (Blau, 1964), the norm of reciprocity (Gouldner, 1960) and the concept of perceived organizational support have been applied to describe the psychological process underlying the employee attitudes and behaviours (Setton, Bennett, & Liden, 1996; Wayne, Shore, Bommer, & Tetrick, 2002). The concept of perceived organizational support (POS) which refers the extent to which the organization values their employees' contributions and cares about their well-being have been used to describe the social exchange relationship between the employer and the employee (Eisenberger, Huntington, Hutchison & Sowa, 1986). Based on the norm of reciprocity (Gouldner, 1960), employees who perceive high levels of POS are more likely to reciprocate the organization with positive attitudes such as higher levels of affective commitment and favorable work behaviours such as commitment to organizational goals and lower intention to leave (Eisenberger, et al., 1986; Eisenberger, Fasolo, & Davis-LaMastro, 1990; Eisenberger, Cummings, Armeli, & Lynch, 1997). The arguments above based on the social exchange theory, the concept of perceived organizational support (POS) which is the commitment of the organization to the employee and the norm of reciprocity is further developed into the organizational support theory (Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002).

Mainly drawing on the social exchange theory and the organizational support theory, the concept of perceived organizational support (POS) which is the commitment of the organization to the employee, the norm of reciprocity as well as the other relevant literature in the human resource management and organizational behaviour research, this paper examines the antecedents and outcomes of perceived organizational support (POS).

Since the seminal work on POS by Eisenberger and colleagues (Eisenberger, et al., 1986), many researchers have investigated the effects of POS on important work outcomes such as affective commitment and turnover intention (Eisenberger, et al., 1986; Eisenberger et al., 1990; Setton et al., 1996; Wayne, Shore & Liden, 1997). Although the organizational support theory (Eisenberger, et al., 1986; Eisenberger et al., 2001; Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002) suggests that employees are likely to develop higher levels of POS and reciprocate the organization with positive attitudes and behaviours when they perceive the organization cares about their well-being and values their contribution, little research has been conducted to examine factors that contribute to POS. Although HRM practices have been argued to play a key role to develop and maintain the exchange relationship between the employee and the organization (Tsui, Pearce, Porter, & Tripoli, 1997), empirical research offers little insight on how appropriate HRM practices can be chosen and implemented to help build high levels of POS, which in turn, contribute to positive work attitudes and behaviours.

Social exchange theory and organizational support theory also suggests that the resources received from the organization are more highly valued if they are based on discretionary choice versus a requirement. Discretionary choice implies an investment, whereas legislated or required actions are considered purely costs rather than investments. Thus, HR practices which are intended to enhance the organization's human capital (such as career development opportunities and providing good supervision) are an optional investment and discretionary, and should contribute to POS (Eisenberger et al., 1986). Besides, Meyer and Allen (1997) indicated that a common theme linking antecedents to commitment is the extent to which the antecedents signal that the organization is supportive of the employee, consistent with the view that they operate via POS. In short, the underpinning social exchange theory predicts that the exchange of favorable treatment could be prolonged if the receipt of resources from another party is highly in need and valuable and the actions are discretionary (Blau, 1964; Eisenberger et al., 1997)

In the HRM literature, researchers argue that the implementation of progressive HR practices that affect employees' skills and motivation can create strategic advantage for the organization (e.g. Snell & Dean, 1992; Becker & Gerhart, 1996; Delery & Doty, 1996; Delaney and Huselid, 1996). This is mainly due to the strategic value of HR to create organizational culture and social relationships that cannot be readily replicated by other organizations. However, there are very few past studies that have established the linkage between the implementation of appropriate discretionary HRM practices based on established motivation theories and the development of positive perceived organizational support.

One of the aims of this study is to address this gap in the literature by examining the role of HRM practices based on the Alderfer's (1972) ERG theory of motivation to influence the employees' perception of high perceived organizational support (POS) to meet the need for a more relationship based HRM approach compared to the control approach especially for academics who are professionals in their disciplines.

In sum, review of both the POS and HR literature suggest the importance of research on the relationship between supportive HR practices and POS. Thus, this paper aims to address this important issue by examining the influence of employee perceptions of several important HR practices, namely, pay level satisfaction, career development opportunities, work-family support and leader-member exchange (LMX) on their evaluations of POS.

THE HIGHER EDUCATION INDUSTRY

A survey conducted by an international research firm Taylor Nelson Sofres (TNS) among 600 urban adults showed that job hopping is a phenomenon employers have to contend with (Anonymous, 2005). The report showed that 58% of currently employed adults Malaysians have worked for up to three companies in the past five years with 23% indicating they intend to change employers within the next years. Meanwhile, 74% of the younger employees have changed employers over the past five years while 39% will change employers within the next two years. This report implies that organizations need to be more assertive to strengthen employees' job commitment.

In the context of the higher education industry, Malaysia aims to be an international hub for world class education in its bid to be a big player in the attractive regional education scene and targets about 100,000

foreign students by 2010. It has 17 public universities, four foreign branch campuses of foreign universities, 21 private universities and 500 private colleges (Uda Nagu, 2007). The private institutions of higher learning is playing an equally important role with the public universities to offer quality higher education and attract foreign students to Malaysia who contribute some RM50 million in direct earnings to Malaysia annually (Uda Nagu, 2007). This trend of globalization, liberalization and reforms to the educational system to improve the ranking of the universities brings many challenges on developing ways to improve staff commitment to universities. One primary criteria for world class universities is the ability to attract and retain excellent and experienced academics. This is because each faculty member is an important part of the institution. He interacts, facilitate and motivate students to achieve greater heights and his work makes a difference towards the academic reputation of the institution apart from other factors such as excellence in facilities, size and location.

Based on 'The Academic Reputation Survey' conducted by a team led by the Malaysian Qualifications Board (MQA), no public university in Malaysia were rated in the six-star "Outstanding" category while Universiti Sains Malaysia was the only one rated in the 5-star "Excellent" category (Ramachandran & Foo, 2007). Thus, to improve the ratings of Malaysian universities, it is important to develop a pool of excellent and experienced academics as they play strategic roles to improve ratings in key areas such as research quality, academic reputation of faculty, academic programs quality, research contribution to society, preparation of tomorrow's leaders and quality of graduates.

Over the past decades, local universities continue to face the problem of academic staff turnover or "brain drain" (Khoo, 1981). To the best of knowledge, Malaysian universities may still face the problem of high academic staff turnover though no studies have examined the extent of academic staff turnover in Malaysia in recent years. This voluntary turnover of academic staffs particularly the desirable ones, will not only have a detrimental effect on the institution both in replacement costs and work disruption, but also jeopardize the nation's aim to produce quality human capital and workforce. It is obvious that the institutions cannot get a return from their investment on faculty members' promotion, training and sabbatical leave. Therefore, understanding the factors that precede organizational commitment can enhance better administrative decisions for the financial support program of faculty members and also the ability to attract and retain good academics.

Academics can be considered the operational core of the universities and their performance determines, to a large extent, the quality of the student's higher education experience and thereby on the contribution that such institutions make to the society (Capellaras, 2005). Academic staff who are well motivated and committed to their institution can build a national and international reputation for themselves and the institution and the universities can attract high caliber students, research funds and consultancy contracts (Rowley, 1996). Limited empirical studies conducted among academic staff have suggested several antecedents of academic staffs' affective commitment to the university such as extrinsic and intrinsic job satisfaction (Mohd. Nasurdin, Ramayah, Abdullah, Hemdi and Seow, 2003), economic compensation and support and recognition (Capellaras, 2005), supervision, training opportunities and distributive justice (Chungtai and Zafar, 2006), perceived external prestige of the university (Fuller, Hester, Barnett, Frey and Relyea, 2006) as well as procedural and distributive justice (Yusof and Shamsuri, 2006). However, these studies have not examined the possible mediating effect of perceived organizational support (POS) on the influence of human resource management (HRM) practices on affective organizational commitment and turnover intention of the academic staffs as suggested by the organizational support theory (Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002).

Furthermore, creating a team of committed and high quality academic staff who are committed to improve teaching and learning methods, strengthening research and innovation, strengthening Malaysia's institutions of high learning to world class standards and enhancing internationalization to turn Malaysia into a leading education hub is an important step towards the creation of apex universities in Malaysia as outlined in National Higher Education Strategic Plan (Atan, 2007). In Sarawak, the importance of the higher education sector is also emphasized through one of the strategy unveiled by the State Government ie. to develop human capital and research and development (R & D) capability which is necessary to propel the State to achieve all objectives of the Ninth Malaysian Plan or 9MP (Anonymous, 2006).

This is because a team of committed academics at the private higher education institutions play complimentary roles with their counterparts in the public higher education institutions to assist the government to develop the human capital who are smart, well-educated and have a first class mentality required to achieve Vision 2020. Meanwhile, the PHEI has to justify whether their HR practices will influence the academics' desirable attitudes and behaviours due to budget constraints.

The importance of supportive HR practices that develop quality human capital in the context of higher education is also highlighted by some past researches. For example, Garavan, Morley, Gunnigle and Collins (2001) suggested that HRM practices are likely to contribute to human capital accumulation and employees place value on the investments that organization's make in their human capital enhancement. Hence, organizations should view investment in human capital as important as human competencies are one of the resources available to organizations. More specifically, Kumar and Idris (2006) suggested that management commitment to activities typically associated to the characteristics of learning organizations (institutions of higher learning) such as management commitment to teaching and learning, research and development and professional service will influence the extent that academic staff are willing to share their knowledge within the organization. This may reflect pathways for the development of continuous learning opportunities for staff members and suggests that it is advantageous for universities to establish learning culture as learning organizations are more productive and staff will be more satisfied because they have opportunities to learn and continuously develop professionally.

Hislop (2003) extended the ideas of Garavan et al. (2001) and Kumar and Idris (2006) and proposed a model that considers how the knowledge workers motivation to share their knowledge may be shaped by HRM practices that leads to perceptions of support, trust and delivery of the psychological contract deals. These will create the attitudinal consequences of commitment and willingness to share knowledge. Hence, they suggest the links between knowledge management, HRM and commitment literatures and suggest that the success of universities as centers of knowledge excellence is predicated on the employees level of perceived organizational support, affective commitment to the organization and willingness to share their knowledge.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

The higher education industry is very worthy for research as it is now an important sector playing a key role in improving productivity and occupational skills, engaging many academics and students and has numerous links with industrial and community activities as well as enhance the nation's ability to compete in a volatile global knowledge economy (Tight, 2003; Humphreys & Hoque, 2007).

In order for private institutions of higher learning to contribute significantly towards the establishment of apex universities in Malaysia as outlined in the National Higher Education Strategic Plan, they must be able to attract qualified academics who will stay with the universities and perform at high levels. Research indicates that employees who are committed to the organization are more likely to demonstrate behaviors that are beneficial to organizations such as better performance at work, attendance and retention in their positions (Meyer & Allen, 1997). HRM practices which signal that the organization is supportive of the employee, are one way that organizations can build commitment in their employees (Meyer & Allen, 1997).

While committed academics are the key towards the successful private universities in Malaysia (Humphreys & Hoque, 2007) and since academics have a high need for support and recognition, there is very little empirical studies thus far which have been conducted to examine the role of perceived organizational support (POS) to enhance the level of affective commitment of academics using the academics working with the private institutions of higher learning (Rowley, 1996; Capelleras, 2005; Joiner and Bakalis, 2006). Moreover, academics perceived that they have 'lost their voice' as the management of private universities had become increasingly reluctant to listen to them, had lost respect for their knowledge and expertise, had increased their teaching loads and the administrative burden had become, unmanageable (Humphreys & Hoque, 2007).

Limited empirical studies conducted among academic staff have suggested several direct antecedents of academic staffs' affective commitment to the university such as extrinsic and intrinsic job satisfaction (Mohd. Nasurdin et al. 2003), economic compensation and support and recognition (Capelleras, 2005), supervision, training opportunities and distributive justice (Chungtai and Zafar, 2006), perceived external prestige of the university (Fuller et al. 2006) as well as procedural and distributive justice (Yusof and Shamsuri, 2006).

Only one study by Fuller et al. (2006) has found that POS was strongly related to academics' affective commitment to the university. Moreover, aspects of managerialism has swept private universities and promote the use of private sector management techniques such as human resource management, total quality management, effectiveness, efficiency in resource use, financial returns, competition between universities and faculties and standards of performance (Humphreys & Hoque, 2007). These values may not mix well with the academics' values of freedom of expression and acquisition of knowledge for its own sake. Hence, different bundles of human resource management (HRM) practices need to be adopted for universities with different academic identities (Delery and Doty, 1996; Smeenk, Eisinga, Teelken, and Doorewaard, 2006).

Taken together, it is important and urgent for research to be undertaken to examine how private universities in Malaysia can foster the desirable employee commitment through designing specific HRM practices which signal organizational care and support as suggested by the social exchange perspective of affective commitment. This is because academics will not be committed to the corporate sector driven managerial identity without their universities extending support to them, recognize their knowledge and expertise and care for their well-being (Humphreys & Hoque, 2007). Hence, appropriate HRM practices is necessary to realize the shift from professional to managerial values among university academics. Besides, understanding the nature of academic work in greater depth is crucial as academics are the key to the higher education process to teach and supervise students as well as carry out and disseminate academic research (Tight, 2003; Humphreys & Hoque, 2007).

In other words, studies that examined the effects of HRM practices on affective commitment via the social exchange perspective of commitment in private universities that have adopted the managerial or hegemonist identity is limited (Smeenk et al. 2006) especially in current times of reducing expenditures and expanding universities, academic employees have an increased teaching load which often expanded at the expense of research time.

Limited empirical studies such as Capelleras (2005) and Joiner and Bakalis (2006) conducted thus far centered around the important role of academics to create excellence learning experience and build national and international reputation for themselves and their institutions in the research, publishing and professional areas and such profile may have a significance impact on the ability of the institution to attract high caliber students, research funds and consultancy contracts. However, such achievements depend on exceptionally high level of affective commitment of the academics to their institutions.

This study aims to answer the call from recent studies about the affective commitment level of academics such as Rowley (1996), Capelleras (2005) and Joiner and Bakalis (2006) for more studies to be conducted to examine the role of perceived organizational support (POS) towards enhancing the level of affective commitment for academics working outside the western countries. This study aims to provide an unique contribution to the commitment literature in the private higher education industry by examining the possible mediating effect of POS on the relationship of four key HRM practices namely, pay level satisfaction, career development opportunities, work-family support and leader-member exchange (LMX) on the academics' level of affective commitment and also turnover intention using academics working with the private institutions of higher learning in Malaysia as respondents to this study.

Affective organizational commitment is among the most researched topics in the area of organizational behaviour and education because of their impact on behaviour at work such as compliance with directives, effective performance in their jobs or lower turnover, absenteeism and other desirable organizational

outcomes (Testa, 2001). However, literature search has found no previous studies that have investigated the mediating process to explain the relationship between the human resource management (HRM) practices and employee commitment for academic staff working with private higher education institutions in Malaysia, especially in Sarawak. Theoretically, Meyer and Smith (2001) suggested that the influence of HRM practices (performance appraisal, benefits, training and career development) on affective and normative commitment were largely mediated by organizational support and to a lesser extent by procedural justice, hence, HRM effect on commitment are neither direct nor unconditional. Practically, the Malaysian Government and the Sarawak State Government have always emphasized the importance of motivated academics to drive the Malaysian knowledge economy by producing quality human capital. Thus, this study addresses an important strategic national objective of producing quality human capital and most importantly, this study aims to address the gaps in the literature for more empirical studies on the mediating mechanisms as suggested by Meyer and Smith (2001) to better explain how the implementation of appropriate HRM practices can help to build high levels of POS, which in turn, will contribute to desirable work attitudes and organizational behaviours such as organizational commitment and turnover intention.

In other words, the study will contribute significantly towards the 'second wave of development' as advocated by the State Government which is based on development of the human capital (the sum of the skills, knowledge and general attribute of the people). This is because academics are the ones who produce the future human capital of the state. Hence, this study will also set the research agenda towards understanding the process of creating a pool of committed academic staff of private universities in Malaysia who will contribute towards developing the human capital needed by the nation through creating educated individuals who possessed strong mentality with sharp minds who can spearhead the planning and implementation of projects under the 9MP.

On the other hand, existing commitment literature for the higher education industry has overlooked the importance of investigating the affective commitment of the academics from the multi-foci perspective as suggested by earlier researchers such as Morrow (1983) and Reichers (1985). This is because individuals experience multiple attachments to multiple constituencies in the organization and beyond the organization.

Specifically, factors influencing professional commitment are gaining more importance partly due to the changing patterns of management with increasing mergers, downsizing and layoffs. Individuals become unable to depend on a single organization for their careers and commitment to one's career or profession accordingly becomes an important source of occupational meaning (Chang, 1999). However, the possible influence of POS on professional commitment remains to be explored as no previous studies have examined this relationship.

As Lee, Carswell and Allen (2000) argued, it is important to investigate the role of professional commitment influencing the employees' organizational commitment as professions are important in the lives of many people and the potential link between professional commitment and important work outcomes such as turnover intention and job performance. However, existing empirical research on the relationship between professional commitment and organizational commitment remains inconsistent and need to be further explored. Some studies found there was conflict between the values related to one's psychological link to his occupation and those related to one's organization such as Coombs & Gomez-Mejia (1999) while other researchers argue that one's commitment to the values and norms of the profession is not necessarily inconsistent or conflicting with those of the organization (for example, Bartol, 1979; Mathieu & Zajac, 1990; Wallace, 1993; Lee et al., 2000; Cetin, 2006).

Hence, more studies regarding employee's attitude toward his profession are required to better understand the behaviour or attitude of the private universities' academics. Furthermore, it is theoretically fruitful to examine the relationships between different forms of commitment as academics will form some type of commitment to the values and standards of his or her chosen profession as well as to the organization in which the professional practice is practiced. On this note, this study will address this gap by reexamining the relationship between professional commitment and organizational commitment in the context of private higher education. Besides, it will also explore the possible relationship that academics

who perceive higher POS in terms of private universities providing more support for scholarly activities, will be more committed to the academic profession (professional commitment) by being more involved in the activities of his profession such as producing more publishable research papers and engaging in quality teaching.

In summary, this study attempts to contribute to the commitment literature by addressing the important research problem of whether perceived organizational support (POS) mediates the influence of human resource management practices (HRM) on the academics' affective organizational commitment to the universities and their turnover intention.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The general objectives of this study are three- fold:

1. The study will examine whether the human resource management practices of the private higher education institutions (PHEI) in Malaysia will influence the academics' level of affective commitment to the organization and their turnover intention through perceived organizational support (POS).
2. The study will examine the two important mediating factors in the relationship of POS to the academics' level of commitment to the organization and their turnover intention. These mediating factors are felt obligation and trust in management.
3. The study will test the mediating role of professional commitment in the relationship of POS to the academics' level of affective commitment to the organization and their turnover intention.

The study is intended to determine what effect selected HRM practices, as perceived by employees, have on employee organizational commitment and perceived organizational support. It emphasizes on the importance of employees' perception to describe the process of the influence of supportive HR practices on employee attitudes and behaviors. This is because many studies (for example, Ogilvie, 1986; Iles, Mabley and Robertson, 1990; Kinicki, Carson and Bohlander, 1992; Whitener, 2001; Agarwala, 2003) have suggested that HRM practices to foster commitment should consider the importance of the employees' perception compared to reality. This may be due to that unexpected outcomes might have resulted from the fact that employees' perception were influenced in ways that were quite different from what was intended and that HRM practices signals organizational care and trust to the employees such as fairness of promotion practices and merit system accuracy (procedural justice). Other examples include, participation in the stress counseling might have made employees aware that the organization was a major contributor to the stress they are experiencing or participation in the developmental awareness centers might have increased the employees' awareness that they are in the wrong path.

The combined hypothesized model is as follows:-

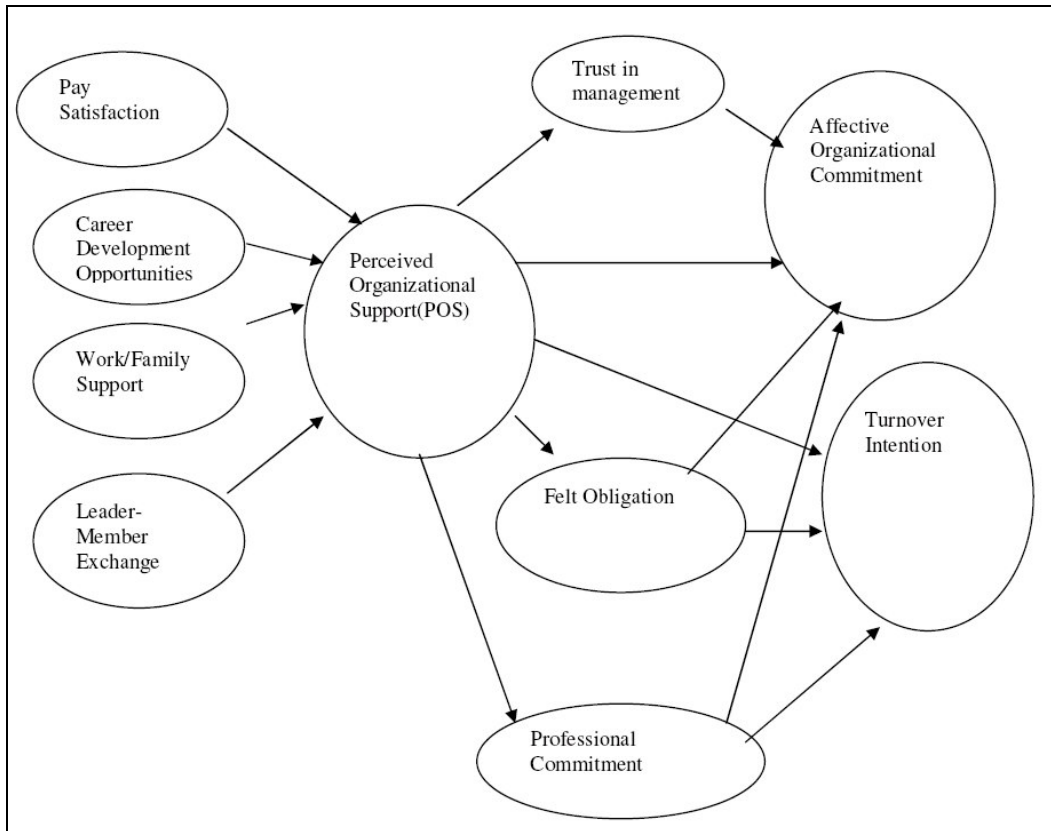


Figure 1: Hypothesized Model

POTENTIAL CONTRIBUTIONS

This study has the potential to contribute to the literature in at least the following aspects. First and most important, by incorporating HR practices as antecedents of POS, this research links the HR and organizational behaviour (OB) literature. Although HR and OB are highly interrelated, research in these areas are often not integrated in a single study and hence, more integration is necessary. For example, despite the fact that implementation of supportive HR practices such as pay satisfaction, career development opportunities, work-life balance and leader-member exchange (LMX) often communicate the degree to which the organization cares about its employees and values their contribution to the organization, POS is often examined as an OB topic. For example, Wayne et al. (1997) suggest that when organizations invest in and provide recognition for employees, they are encouraging the development of POS. The limited studies in this area of study suggests that POS provides an explanation for the process by which HR practices impact employee outcomes, and that HR practices are an important source of employee perceptions of organizational support.

Little research has examined the antecedents of POS from the HR perspective. The aspects of HR practices studied include growth opportunities (Allen et al., 2003), development opportunities (Wayne et al., 1997) and inclusion in decision making (Wayne et al., 2002; Allen et al., 2003). These studies represent a limited and somewhat narrow perspective as they examined only one particular HR practice in each study. Thus, this study will contribute further to knowledge about the antecedents of POS from the HR perspective by examining the influence of four HR practices which are pay level satisfaction, career development opportunities, work-family support and leader-member exchange (LMX) on POS. Further, those studies that investigated the relationship between HR practice and POS are often not guided by any motivational theory. On the other hand, although the behavioral perspective of the HR literature argue that the purpose of various HR practices is to influence employee attitudes and behaviors, HR literature has focused only on the relationship between HR practices and firm performance (for example, Delery and Doty, 1996; Huselid, 1995), and has rarely examined the effects of the implementation of supportive HR

practices on employee attitudes and behaviors. Hence, this study attempts to contribute further to the literature by examining the influence of supportive HRM practices as suggested by Alderfer's (1972) ERG theory of motivation namely, pay satisfaction, career development opportunities, work-life balance and leader-member exchange (LMX) that are used in private higher education institutions in Malaysia on important employee attitudes and behaviors toward the organization such as perceived organizational support, affective organizational commitment and turnover intention. In addition, this study differs from previous studies as it investigates the influence of both work and non-work related HR practices on POS and the choice of HR practices is theoretically justified (Pare & Tremblay, 2007). Besides, this study will be able to provide insights on which HR practices are more strongly related to POS.

Following the suggestions by Delery (1998), Mohamed et al. (2006) and Pare & Tremblay (2007) that studies that examine the mechanisms through which HR practices affect organizational outcomes is still at an embryonic stage and remain to be fully understood, this study aims to contribute to the literature by examining whether the employees' perception of supportive HR practices will influence their perceptions of organizational support, which in turn, will contribute to employee attitudes and behaviors beneficial to the organization. This study is consistent with the view that HR plays an indirect role in enhancing affective commitment (Meyer & Smith, 2001; Whitener, 2001) and these relationships are not necessarily direct or unconditional and POS is an important mediator (Meyer & Smith, 2001).

In other words, this study attempts to provide further empirical evidence to address the gap that supportive HR practices may not only signal the extent to which organizations value and care for employees and signal the managers' desire to engage in social exchange relationships with employees (Eisenberger et al. 1996; Allen et al., 2003) but also lead to desirable organizational outcomes such as affective commitment to the organization and reduced turnover intention (Wayne et al., 1997; Eisenberger, 1986, 1990).

Second, this study will provide further empirical evidence and validates the social exchange theory (Blau, 1964), the organizational support theory (Eisenberger, et al., 1986; Eisenberger et al., 2001; Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002) and specifically in the aspect of the norm of reciprocity (Gouldner, 1960) in the employer-employee relationship, by investigating the possible mediating role of felt obligation in the POS-work outcomes relationship.

Tansky & Cohen (2001) has identified perceived organizational support to build organizational commitment among employees. In addition, the empirical findings of Meyer and Smith (2001) identified perceived organizational support as a factor that partially mediate the relationships between HRM practices and organizational commitment. Other studies that have link POS and turnover intentions include Rhoades et al. (2001) and Eisenberger et al. (2002) which linked POS with actual turnover using rewards, procedural justice and supervisory support while Allen et al. (2003) suggests that POS mediates supportive HR on turnover via organizational commitment.

In a more recent study, Lee and Peccei (2007) mentioned that studies that examined the processes that underlie the relationship of POS and affective commitment is still limited and suggested future studies to investigate other mechanisms through which POS influences affective commitment such as felt obligation.

Hence, following the findings of Tansky & Cohen (2001), Meyer and Smith (2001), Rhoades et al. (2001) and Eisenberger et al. (2002) and Allen et al. (2003), this study will extend knowledge regarding the mediating process through which POS influences employee attitudes and behaviors, and demonstrate why organizations need to implement supportive HRM practices to improve affective organizational commitment and reduce turnover intention.

This study examines the relationship between POS and a variety of important work outcomes to provide further insights into the effects of POS. Specifically, this study answers the call by Tan (2008) for more studies to address the gap on the influence of POS between organizational actions and turnover intention for knowledge workers in Malaysia by examining the possible mediating effects of trust in management, felt obligation and also professional commitment on the influence of POS on affective organizational commitment and turnover intention.

It is also to be noted that this study examines the influence of LMX on POS and whether professional commitment mediates the influence of POS on affective organizational commitment. This is consistent with Reicher's (1985) multiple foci commitments perspective and follows the suggestion of Lavelle et al. (2007) that past studies offer empirical support that employees demonstrate commitment toward a variety of foci and that examining commitment to these various foci can improve our understanding of key employee behaviours. Specifically, this study will improve understanding about the multi-foci perspective of social exchange relationships in organizations as it examines the interrelationships between variables reflecting social exchange of the employees with the organization which is POS and affective organizational commitment, with the supervisor which is LMX as well as with the profession which is professional commitment. Furthermore, taking a multi-foci perspective of the employees' experience at work is likely to become increasingly important (Lavelle et al., 2007).

In sum, this study contributes to the limited body of knowledge about the psychological processes underlying the formation of organizational commitment through the perspectives of the social exchange theory (Blau, 1964) and the organizational support theory (Eisenberger, et al., 1986; Eisenberger et al., 2001; Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002). In particular, Oliver (1990) has likened the study of organizational commitment to a "black box" in which various individual and organizational factors determine commitment levels and in turn affect certain behaviors, with scant attention to what happens "in between".

Third, using a sample of academics working for private institutions of higher learning (PHEIs) as the context of study will offer interesting insights on the management of knowledge workers. This context warrants urgent investigation as private institutions of higher learning (PHEIs) are playing important role to support Malaysia's mission to be the important educational hub. Moreover, knowledge workers are the key source of competitive advantage for the knowledge economy (Drucker, 1999) and most importantly, committed academics will assist the State Government to develop the quality human capital required to achieve the objectives of the 'second wave of development' as advocated by the Sarawak State Government which is based on development of the human capital, which in turn will ensure the success of Vision 2020 and the National Mission in general. Hence, highly skilled professionals should not be managed as disposable productive resources but rather should be considered as human beings with specific needs and interests (Pare & Tremblay, 2007). Managers need to bolster their sense of self-worth by treating them as intellectual assets, not as operating costs, and by trusting them, supporting their career experiences and fulfill their needs in order to gain sustainable competitive advantage by keeping their employees' skills and experience within the organization rather than outside it (Tan, 2008).

However, managing knowledge workers such as the academics is not a simple task as they are known to have higher expectations from their working life, and they may be more committed to their profession than their organization (Coombs & Gomez-Mejia, 1999). As suggested by Coombs & Gomez-Mejia (1999) and Drucker (1999), this study examines whether supportive HR practices will influence employee perceptions of POS and its direct and indirect influence on important work outcomes. Besides, this study also investigates the mediating role of professional commitment in this process as academics may join private institutions of higher learning (PHEIs) for further advancement in their profession rather than committed to their organization. Thus, this study has important practical implications for the management of knowledge workers in the context of academics working for private institutions of higher learning (PHEIs) in Sarawak in particular and Malaysia in general. It will enhance knowledge on the role of social exchange relationships in private universities, especially relating to management practice and worker response which lacks empirical investigation.

Specifically, this study will provide important empirical evidence to the management of private institutions of higher learning (PHEIs) in Malaysia on the influence of supportive HR practices on important employee attitudes and behaviors toward the organization such as affective organizational commitment and turnover intention. This important research gap is also suggested by Pare & Tremblay (2007) and Tan (2008) on the need to examine turnover intentions in a variety of organizational and cultural contexts for various professional groups in Asia. The exploration of the antecedents and consequences of POS have been widely observed in the Western context and hence, Tan (2008) have mentioned that findings for Asian

collective culture such as Malaysian employees is still in the preliminary stages. Besides, Shore et.al. (2006) also suggest that the type of job may be important for understanding exchange relationships.

Since private institutions of higher learning (PHEIs) have limited financial resources and these institutions need to be accountable to their shareholders in terms of their financial performance, this study will also provide useful insights on the importance of implementing supportive HR practices to elicit important employee attitudes and behaviors toward the organization such as perceived organizational support, affective organizational commitment and turnover intention.

CONCLUSION

In sum, this paper presents an overview on the important contributions of this study, especially its aims of providing new empirical evidence by using the social exchange theory and organizational support theory to predict the influence of the four(4) supportive HRM practices, namely pay satisfaction, career development opportunities, work-life balance and leader-member exchange (LMX) on two (2) important employee attitudes and behaviours, namely affective organizational commitment and turnover intention. It justifies the importance of creating a team of committed academics working for the private institutions of higher learning in Malaysia in terms of realizing the mission of Malaysia's higher education industry.

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