

A Study on Factors Affecting Affective Organizational Commitment among Knowledge Workers in Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

Knowledge management (KM) has been often claimed to be an essential ingredient in building competitive advantage. One of the biggest challenges for most knowledge organizations in these highly competitive times comes from changes in work behaviours of knowledge workers. Understanding knowledge workers and what makes them stay and continue to contribute to the organization is a formidable task for most managers. Thus, the nature of this study is to determine the factors which will influence affective organizational commitment among knowledge workers. This research will contribute significantly to organizations wanting to encourage knowledge workers to be committed and continue their service with them in this knowledge-based economy.

Keywords

Knowledge workers, Affective Organizational Commitment, Competitive advantage.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Organizational commitment is an important area of study to many researchers and organizations because the outcomes of this behaviour or value may help to determine many work related interaction of the employees. It is mainly related to the employee's desire to continue working with the particular organization. As such, researchers and practitioners are ever so keen and interested to understand the factors that may influence an individual's decision to stay or leave the organization. Here, affective commitment most often tends to be the most highly related to the desire to leave an organization.

Affective Organizational Commitment is one of the most prominent work attitudes examined in the work and organizational literature. Among the first studies on organizational commitment were conducted by Porter, Steers, Mowday and Boulian (1974), where they studied on Organizational commitment and turnover among

psychiatric technicians. Mowday, Richard, and Porter (1979) also studied on the measure of organization commitment. Studies have shown that Organizational Commitment have received considerable attention due to the importance that managers place on retaining personnel (Johnston, Parasuraman, Futrell, and Black, 1990; Boles, Madupalli, Rutherford and Wood, 2007). However, the importance of retaining employees or personnel is not only confined to any single industry, as many employers place great importance to employee retention and to reduce employee turnover as this may involve high costs in terms of induction, training and productivity (Firth, Mellor, Moore and Loquet 2004).

In today's world, we see an increase in the use of knowledge in organizations in various industries. This is the era of k-economy where knowledge is deemed an important factor that may contribute to the success of an individual as well as the organization. As such, these individuals whose work primarily consists of having the updated knowledge within their area of speciality and apply it to bring benefits for the organization (Amar, 2002), are called knowledge workers. The behaviour and attitudes of a knowledge worker is very different from an average white collar worker and as such, the behavioural outcomes will also be different.

Therefore, it becomes pertinent that the behavioural outcomes of the knowledge worker are understood especially with regards to the employee's affective organizational commitment. At present, we do not know how knowledge workers' organizational commitment is affected by the organizations leadership traits, nor do we know how the organizations' view on knowledge sharing affects the employees' affective organizational commitment.

2.0 DEFINITIONS AND CONCEPTS

2.1 Knowledge Worker

A knowledge worker is defined as an employee who applies theoretical and analytical knowledge acquired

through formal education to develop new products or services and required continuous learning (Scott, 2005). Knowledge workers also are known to make their living by accessing, creating and using information in way that add value to an enterprise and its stakeholders (Tymon and Stumpf, 2002).

The review on knowledge workers by present researchers shows that knowledge workers deal with complex and often with new technologies. Their daily work may be unpredictable, multi-disciplinary and usually non-repetitive (Scott, 2005) which involves the utilizations and creation of knowledge (Hislop, 2005). The jobs assigned to them have long term goals and due to the relative complexity of the task, they may need to collaborate with co-workers in the accomplishment of their task (Scott, 2005). Their work usually has very little structure and mostly cannot be standardized as they are required to be unique and exercise ingenuity in accomplishing their tasks (Amar, 2002).

In the present times in Malaysia, there is an increasing demand for knowledge workers where knowledge workers are considered a pre-requisite for success in this era of K-economy (Fong, 2006). As such, it is very important to understand these new generation employees in terms of recruiting, retaining and getting the optimal performance from them for all the organizations (Amar, 2002). In fact, understanding them and the level of their commitment to the organization is vital to retain them in the organization and in getting them to effectively contribute towards the organization (Kubo and Saka, 2002). This has been a concern as knowledge workers are known to be highly mobile in their jobs as they favour advancement in their careers (Yigitcanlar, Baum and Horton, 2007). The harsh reality is that, when these knowledge workers leave, they will take their knowledge and skills along with them, much to the dismay of the organization and the management. Many employers place great importance to employee retention and to reduce employee turnover as this may involve high costs in terms of induction, training and productivity (Firth 2004), as well as ensures that the organization is fully geared up with right strategies and resources needed to succeed in this competitive market.

2.2 Affective Organizational Commitment (AOC)

Meyer and Allen (1991) conceptualized organizational commitment as a three-dimensional construct of affective commitment, continuance commitment and normative commitment. This Three-Component Model of OC, shows the cumulative strength of individuals connected to an organization because they want to (affective), they need to (continuance), and they ought to (normative) remain in the organization

As such, **Affective Organizational Commitment (AOC)** refers to the employee's emotional attachment to the organization. Employees with strong affective commitment remain with the organization because they

want to do so (Meyer and Allen, 1991). This state of attachment reflects the strength of an individual's identification with and involvement in a particular organization (Agarwal and Ramaswami, 1993).

This research survey is limiting the scope of research to study only AOC, the 'want to' factor, as the purpose of this study is to understand what factors that influence an employee's affective organizational commitment, more so as the turnover rate of knowledge workers in Malaysia is alarmingly high.

3.0 FACTORS INFLUENCING AOC

Past studies in the literature have attempted to identify various organizational factors that influence Affective organization commitment. These factors include: task characteristics (Hunt, Chonko and Wood, 1985), supervisory behaviours (Johnston et al. 1990), role ambiguity of the employees in the organization (Agarwal and Ramaswami, 1993) and fairness of Human Resources Management (HRM) practices (Ahmad and Schroeder, 2003), among others.

In this study, five factors are identified that may influence AOC which were tested against AOC if their influence is significant.

3.1 Knowledge Sharing Practices

Knowledge Sharing Practices in this context reflects the organizations efforts to promote, encourage and provide a conducive and an enabling environment for knowledge sharing to take place. As knowledge workers thrive on knowledge and deal with knowledge sharing and knowledge improving, it would be an interesting fact to study the extent of knowledge sharing towards affective organizational commitment. However, according to Hislop (2003) there has been limited research commitment and knowledge-sharing attitudes and behaviours. Nonetheless, Massingham and Diment, 2009 have found in their research that Knowledge sharing does contribute towards organizational commitment among employees.

3.2 Task Orientation

Task Orientation as described by Agarwal and Ramaswami (1993) is task variety and task autonomy which encompasses characteristics of a job that allows the employees to undertake a wide range of activities in their work and the extent an employee has a say in how their job is carried out, respectively (Agarwal and Ramaswami 1993; Hunt et al, 1985).

Studies have shown that an opportunity to work on challenging, exciting and interesting work tend to be more involved and satisfied, are in turn more committed to their organization and are less likely to leave their organization assignment, reflecting AOC (Pil and Macduffie, 1996; Price and Mueller, 1981). For the scope of this study, task orientation reflects nature of the

job, the range of activities involved and the extent of freedom to plan, decide and carry out the tasks associated with his or her job function as seen fit by the employee.

3.3 Compensation

Willis (2000) describes compensation as ‘the most critical issue when it comes to attracting and keeping talents.’ Sometimes, some companies may even provide remuneration packages that are well above the market rate and provide additional perks to attract and retain critical talents (Parker and Wright, 2000; Bassi and Van Buren, 1999). According to Mercer Report (2003), employees will stay if they are rewarded fairly and adequately. An organization which does not pay equitably compared to others, it may risk losing the employees because of the non-competitive compensation package (Adams, 1965). In recent studies by Ansari et al, (2000), the results have shown that employees were more likely to demonstrate high affective commitment if they perceived the compensation as fair.

3.4 Performance Management and Promotion

Ansari et al, (2000) cited Lawler, (1989) having noted that distribution of organizational rewards such promotion, status, and performance evaluations have tremendous impact on organizational commitment. Hung, et al (2000), citing Kwon (2001) has also found that career development and fair promotion opportunities to be predictive of greater AOC among employees (Ansari, et al 2000).

3.5 Training and Development

Training and development are a common form of human capital investment for individual and organizational improvements (Chew and Chan, 2007) to prepare the organization for the future (Wood and De Menezes, 1998). Literatures have shown that employee empowerment through training activities not only help to develop these employees but also help to enhance their commitment to the organization (Ansari et al, 2000; Greenberg 1990; Bassi and Van Buren, 1999).

4.0 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND HYPOTHESIS DEVELOPMENT

This research will explore five factors: knowledge sharing practices (KSP), task orientation (TO), fairness of performance management and promotion (PP), opportunities of training and development (TD), and finally compensation (C).

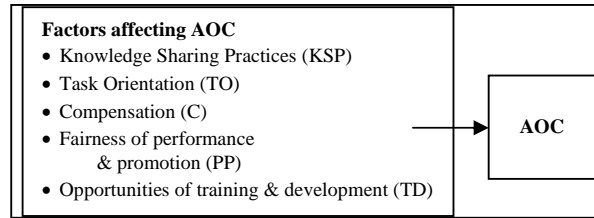


Figure 1. Research framework

With reference to the literature and the research framework, we hypothesize that:

- H1. Knowledge Sharing Practices is positively related to the AOC among knowledge workers.
- H2. Task orientation is positively related to the AOC among knowledge workers.
- H3. Compensation is positively related to the AOC among knowledge workers.
- H4. Fairness of Performance management and promotion is positively related to the AOC among knowledge workers.
- H5. Opportunities of training and development positively related to the AOC among knowledge workers.

5.0 SAMPLE AND PROCEDURE

5.1 Research site and sample

This study adopted judgement sampling—a purposive sampling method. It is essential for select respondents who were in the position to shed light on the focus of this research. Hence, the study’s respondents were limited to knowledge workers who fit the description as follows: workers having at least a diploma or degree, who are as experts in their field of work and have been with the current organization for at least one year and their job scope involves non-repetitive tasks where it should involve application of knowledge to complete the tasks.

A total of 400 questionnaires were distributed out and 259 responses were returned giving a usable response rate of 65%.

5.2 Measures

A survey questionnaire consisting of questions measuring factors identified to influence a knowledge worker’s affective organisational commitment and respondents’ level of organizational commitment (Allen & Meyer, 1991) was employed in this research.

The research instrument contains three sections; section A, contains questions on factors influencing AOC, namely Knowledge Sharing Practices--KSP (Pai, 2006), Task Orientation--TO (Agarwal & Ramaswami, 1993), Compensation—C and Opportunities of Training and Development –TD (Ahmad & Schroeder, 2003). The questions used the 5-point Likert Scale indicating 1=Strongly Disagree and 5=Strongly Agree. The

questionnaire developed also included a section on demographic information in Section C.

6.0 RESULTS

6.1 Goodness of Measures

6.1.1 Factors affecting AOC

A test of the construct validity of the scales employed a varimax-rotated principal components analysis. The analysis generated four interpretable factors for the independent variable— Knowledge Sharing Practices (KSP), Task Orientation (TO), Compensation (C) and Opportunities of Training and Development (TD). Bartlett’s test of sphericity and the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure of sampling adequacy are both used to determine the factorability of the matrix as a whole. The KMO is 0.902 and the Bartlett’s Test of Sphericity was significant (Chi-Square = 2853.658, $p < 0.01$ at 0.000) for all factors affecting AOC.

Cronbach’s Coefficients Alpha (Reliability Coefficients) for all the variables measured were found to be more than 0.7 and therefore the factors and items developed in this study are reliable and acceptable at moderate to high levels as they consistently measure the items which were intended to be measured in the first place.

The mean values of all factors affecting AOC were relatively moderate with mean scores ranging from 3.31 to 3.63. Descriptive statistics, inter-correlation among factors, and reliability coefficients for the items are shown in Table 1, and the results indicate that all the independent variables are correlated at moderate levels and reveals that they are fairly independent of each other since the Pearson’s coefficient values are less than 1.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistic, Cronbach’s coefficients alpha and Correlation Coefficients of Factors affecting AOC

	Mean	SD	AOC	KSP	TO	C	PP	TD
AOC	3.54	0.70	0.79					
KSP	3.44	0.57	0.62**	0.90				
TO	3.34	0.73	0.51**	0.53**	0.67			
C	3.31	0.73	0.57**	0.67**	0.52**	0.82		
PP	2.90	0.76	0.26**	0.43**	0.25**	0.31**	0.71	
TD	3.63	0.75	0.37**	0.47**	0.39**	0.45**	0.22**	0.71

Note: N = 259; ** $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$; Diagonal entries indicate Cronbach’s coefficients alpha.

6.1.2 Affective Organizational Commitment

The KMO shows the measure of sampling adequacy was 0.923 and the Bartlett’s Test of Sphericity was significant (Chi-Square = 1443.231, $p < 0.01$ at 0.000) for the measurement of AOC.

The Cronbach’s Coefficients Alpha (Reliability Coefficients) for AOC was found to be more than 0.7 and therefore the items used in this study are reliable and

acceptable at moderate to high levels as they consistently measure the level of AOC among the respondents. The mean value of AOC also shows that it is relatively moderate with mean scores of 3.54.

6.2 Tests of Hypothesis

According to Sekaran (2003), a 5-point Likert scale is an interval scale. Hence, we used multiple regression analysis to analyze our data and test our hypotheses. From the results of the multiple regression analysis, as shown in Table 2, $R^2 = 0.46$ which means that 46% variance is explained by the four independent variables, namely KSP, TO, C and TD, while the remaining 54% is not explained. Fairness of performance management and promotion was found to be insignificant and H4 was not supported.

Table 2: Regression Results to test the relationship between AOC and the factors affecting AOC

Independent Variable	AOC
Model Variables	
KSP	0.223**
TO	0.252**
C	0.237**
PP	0.000
TD	0.156**
R^2	0.459
Adj R^2	0.447
Sig. F Change	0.000

Note: * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$

7.0 DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The results of this research no doubt have several implications to theory and implications to practice. This research has provided some useful insights and implications to organizations and practitioners involved in managing knowledge workers. It has revealed the various factors and their affect or influence on the construct of AOC. Given the growing demand of knowledge workers in the future, policy makers may use the salient points highlighted in this study in order to formulate the organizational practices and policies aimed at keeping the knowledge workers continuously committed with the organization.

Organizations wanting to retain knowledge workers and expect them to develop higher levels of AOC should encourage knowledge sharing amongst employees through organizational support, policies that create an enabling environment for knowledge sharing, promoting knowledge sharing activities, encourage team work amongst employees and forge close relationship between members of the management team and the employees (Benson and Brown, 2007). The sharing of knowledge is

also between the top management and the employees. Agarwal and Ramaswami, (1993) state that non-supportive and inconsiderateness of leaders have detrimental effect on the employees. It is certainly necessary to point out that there are limited researches on the influence of knowledge sharing on commitment levels (Hislop, 2003), nonetheless, there have been some findings to indicate that willingness of workers to share their knowledge may influence the organizational commitment level (Storey and Barnett 2000).

They may also look into ensuring that knowledge workers have the freedom and the empowerment in completing their assigned tasks as long as this freedom is not abused and in-line with the organization's policies. Further to that, the variety of tasks assigned to knowledge workers need to be highly challenging and involves innovation as well as worthwhile to the organization. Supervisors should accommodate the need for a higher degree of freedom so as to allow knowledge workers to carry out their work unimpeded and uninterrupted (Benson and Brown 2007). As highlighted by Gregerman, (1981) knowledge workers have total authority in deciding how to do what their assigned tasks.

Organizations also need to ensure that the compensation system offered to the knowledge workers is such that their achievement toward organizational goals and objectives are fairly compensated (Boles et al, 2007) as well as their efforts are recognised as knowledge workers are suggested to thrive on these stimulus. However, one of the characteristics of knowledge workers does indicate that they do respond well to organizational recognition and by recognition, this may mean that they are fairly compensated for achieving the organizational goals and objective. Yet, the study by (Benson and Brown 2007) on knowledge workers and compensation confirms otherwise indicating knowledge workers do not consider the compensation system as pertinent in influencing affective commitment. This construct may still need to be studied further to confirm and conclude the findings.

Fairness of performance management and promotion H3 was not supported. This was also the case in the study by Lee-Kelly et al, (2007) on knowledge workers where it was found that knowledge workers do not view promotion as important and the indirect relationship to AOC through turnover intention was found to be insignificant. Lee-Kelly et al, (2007) also suggests that this may be due to the characteristics of knowledge workers who see formal and public recognition for their contribution to organisational success as more important. Incidentally this observation also coincides with the characteristics of knowledge workers as outlined by Gregerman (1981) which shows that knowledge workers do respond well to organizational recognition.

Organizations should also need to ensure that knowledge workers are constantly allowed and given the

opportunity to improve themselves through training and development. This may boost the morale of the knowledge workers as well as increase the level of their AOC. This coincides with studies done by Hung et al, (2004) where the construct had a positive correlation with affective commitment. This may be due to the fact that opportunities for training and development are a part of working experiences and such experiences not only enriches the individual but also benefits the organization. Furthermore, it is an established fact that knowledge workers do exhibit high tendencies towards personnel development opportunities to improve themselves to remain competitive in the open market (Gregerman, 1981). Further to that, such opportunities of self improvement, according to Hung et al, (2004) may lead to a sense of obligation and a development of affective attachment to the organization. This has also been confirmed by past researches (Meyer, Allen and Smith, 1993) where training experiences have brought positive impact on commitment level, and now, this factor can be suggested that it is positive for knowledge workers as well.

8.0 LIMITATION OF THE STUDY AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The following limitations are highlighted and acknowledged. A majority of the respondents were from the manufacturing sector. The environment factors in this sector many have been different for these employees. As such, the result may have been different if the percentage of employees participated in the survey had been different. Further to that, if there were a more robust percentage of participation from various sectors, then an independent t-test could have been done to see if there were any differences in affective organisational commitment among the various sectors.

Only 46% variance was able to be explained by the four independent variables, namely Knowledge Sharing Practices (KSP), Task Orientation (TO), Compensation (C) and Opportunities of Training and Development (TD) in this research, while the remaining 54% is not explained. This low figure shows that there are limitations in the model and future research is definitely recommended to identify other factors to complete this model. Future research could explore other variables to explain the model.

This study may also be expanded to do a comparison on the same variables between knowledge workers and non-knowledge workers to further understand the difference in behaviours between these two distinct classes of workers.

9.0 CONCLUSION

In spite of the above limitations, the findings of this research still have important implications to theory and practice. Needless to say, knowledge is an expensive and a hard to replace commodity and knowledge workers are an asset to any organization looking for competitive advantage in the open market. As Malaysia is looking at becoming triumphant in the world of k-economy, organizations need to ensure that they understand and manage the key catalyst i.e. knowledge workers which will ensure their success during these competitive times.

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