

# The Dimensionality of the Hollenbeck, Williams, and Klein (1989) Measure of Goal Commitment on Complex Tasks

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**This research examines the dimensionality of the Hollenbeck, Williams, and Klein (1989) self-report measure of goal commitment on complex tasks. Results from three studies suggest that for complex tasks, responses to a subset of items reflect performance expectancies while another subset of items reflect goal commitment. This response pattern is demonstrated through differential temporal stability, differential relationships with negative feedback reactions, and confirmatory factor analyses. Practical and theoretical implications of the dimensionality of this measure are discussed.** © 1997 Academic Press

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Goal setting research has repeatedly demonstrated that assigning difficult, specific goals on simple or routine tasks results in performance increases. This effect is so robust that replication failures are frequently attributed to ineffective manipulation of individual goals. One of the most common explanations for the failure of goal setting manipulations is that individuals were not committed to achieving the assigned performance goal (Hollenbeck & Klein, 1987; Locke & Latham, 1990). Consequently, a great deal of effort has been devoted to defining the construct of goal commitment (Hollenbeck & Klein, 1987; Kernan & Lord, 1988; Locke, Latham, & Erez, 1988; Naylor & Ilgen, 1984; Tubbs, 1993), identifying its antecedents (Hollenbeck & Klein, 1987;

Locke & Latham, 1990), and developing measurement techniques (Hollenbeck, Klein, O'Leary, & Wright, 1989a; Hollenbeck, Williams, & Klein, 1989b; Tubbs & Dahl, 1991).

One of the most widely used measures of goal commitment is a nine-item self-report scale developed by Hollenbeck, Williams, and Klein (1989b; hereafter referred to as HWK). This measure has been used to assess goal commitment in many research areas including traditional goal setting (Klein, 1991; Tubbs & Dahl, 1991; Wright, 1989; Wright & Kacmar, 1994), absenteeism (Harrison & Shaffer, 1994), accident reduction (Cooper, Phillips, Sutherland, & Makin, 1994), personality (Barrick, Mount, & Strauss, 1993), creativity (Carson & Carson, 1993), multiple goal environments (Gilliland & Landis, 1992), complex task environments (DeShon & Alexander, 1996), and group goal setting (Klein & Mulvey, 1995; Weingart, 1992). The widespread use of the HWK scale is supported by psychometric evidence suggesting that the scale is unidimensional, that responses to the scale are stable over time, and that the scale is related to other important constructs such as motivational force and performance (Hollenbeck *et al.*, 1989a, 1989b).

Recently, the HWK scale was intensely scrutinized in a debate over the dimensionality and appropriateness of self-report measures of commitment (Tubbs, 1993; Tubbs, 1994; Tubbs & Dahl, 1991; Wright, O'Leary-Kelly, Cortina, Klein, & Hollenbeck, 1994). Tubbs (1993) reviewed the goal commitment literature and suggested that the HWK scale assessed a wide variety of motivational constructs including pre-choice expectancy judgments (motivational force), goal choice or goal acceptance, and maintenance intentions. Tubbs (1993) further warned that aggregating responses

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across multiple commitment constructs may cause interpretational ambiguity in the goal commitment research base and suggested that the measurement of goal commitment be matched to the specific construct of interest.

One of the most beneficial aspects of this debate was the clear delineation of the roles played by goal choice and maintenance intentions in the definition and measurement of goal commitment. In both the Hollenbeck and Klein (1987) and Locke, Latham, and Erez (1988) models, goal commitment is viewed as the outcome of the cognitive evaluation of the goal in terms of the likelihood (expectancies) and the attractiveness (valences) of goal achievement. Once the individual has chosen or accepted a particular goal based on the cognitive evaluation, the individual becomes affectively engaged, or committed to achieving the goal. As a result, the individual is willing to invest effort to achieve the goal and is unwilling to lower the goal when presented with negative feedback.

As Tubbs (1993, 1994) pointed out, it is critical that the construct of goal commitment be kept separate from other motivational constructs to avoid conceptual ambiguity. For instance, the cognitive evaluation of goals in terms of expectancies and valences is very similar, or identical, to the construct of motivational force. If goal commitment is defined in terms of expectancies and valences, then a new name is being unnecessarily applied to an already established motivational construct. However, it does appear that the common conceptualization of goal commitment differs from the construct of motivational force. While expectancies influence whether the goal is accepted (Earley, Shalley, & Northcraft, 1992), none of the definitions of goal commitment reviewed by Tubbs and Dahl (1991) refer to expectancies once the decision to pursue the goal has been made. In fact, defining goal commitment as the unwillingness to lower a goal when presented with repeated negative feedback implies that the individual continues to work toward the goal despite low performance expectancies. Tubbs (1993) recognized this potential for the overlap of motivational constructs and recommended that self-report measures be more precisely focused on the construct of goal commitment.

Despite this extensive debate, there is still disagreement over the definition of goal commitment. To provide a clear referent for the current discussion, we define goal commitment as the degree to which the individual considers the goal to be important, is determined to reach it by expending effort over time, and is unwilling to abandon or lower the goal when confronted with setbacks and negative feedback. This definition of goal commitment reflects the most common themes used to describe goal commitment in the recent goal setting

literature (e.g., Campion, & Lord, 1982; Kernan, & Lord, 1988; Latham & Locke 1991; Locke, Latham, & Erez, 1988; Naylor & Ilgen, 1984; Riedel, Nebeker, & Cooper, 1988; Tubbs, 1993; Wright *et al.*, 1994).

A content analysis of the items on the HWK scale (see Table 1)<sup>1</sup> suggests that only a subset (items 4, 5, 6, 7, and 8) are consistent with this definition of goal commitment. For instance, item 5 is a direct assessment of goal commitment and is commonly used as a single item measure of the construct (Earley, Connolly, & Ekegren, 1989; Kanfer & Ackerman, 1989). Item 6 refers to the unwillingness to lower or abandon a goal. Item 8 is consistent with the willingness to invest effort to achieve a goal aspect of the goal commitment definition. Finally, items 4 and 7 assess whether the individual views the goal as important, is attached to the goal, and is determined to reach the goal.<sup>2</sup> In contrast, items 1–3 do not reflect any of the goal commitment definitions reviewed by Tubbs and Dahl (1991). Instead these items appear to measure perceptions of goal difficulty and performance expectancies. Tubbs and Dahl (1991) made a similar classification of these items as measures of expectancies. This dimensionality is consistent with the Wright *et al.* (1994) statement that responses to the HWK scale reflect both prechoice goal evaluations, such as expectancies of goal attainment, and intentions to maintain the goal over time.

**TABLE 1**

**Hollenbeck, Williams, and Klein (1989b) Goal Commitment Questionnaire**

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1. It's hard to take this goal seriously. (R)
  2. It's unrealistic for me to expect to reach this goal. (R)
  3. It's quite likely that this goal may need to be revised, depending on how things go. (R)
  4. Quite frankly, I don't care if I achieve this goal or not. (R)
  5. I am strongly committed to pursuing this goal.
  6. It wouldn't take much to make me abandon this goal. (R)
  7. I think this goal is a good goal to shoot for.
  8. I am willing to put in a great deal of effort to achieve this goal.
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*Note.* Items followed by "R" indicate that the item was reverse scored before analysis.

<sup>1</sup> The ninth item in the HWK goal commitment questionnaire refers to instrumentality and was not included in any of the analyses. This is consistent with Hollenbeck et al. (1989a) who also did not include this item in their analyses.

<sup>2</sup> The wording of items 4 and 7 is ambiguous and they have been construed as an assessment of goal valence by some authors (e.g., Tubbs & Dahl, 1991). Although this interpretation of the items is possible, neither of these items would be considered as an adequate measure of goal valence. Goal valence is typically viewed as the expected affect that the individual would receive if the goal was achieved. Typical items used to assess goal valence (e.g., Tubbs & Dahl, 1991; Tubbs, 1993) are "How satisfied would you be if you reached your assigned goal?" and "how attractive would it be to reach your assigned goal?"

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