



Organizational and client commitment among contracted employees

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Abstract

This study examines affective commitment to employing and client organizations among long-term contracted employees, a new and growing employment classification. Drawing on organizational commitment and social exchange literatures, we propose two categories of antecedents of employee commitment to client organizations. We tested our hypotheses using a survey collected from employees in four UK contracting organizations delivering a service on behalf of a government entity. The results suggest that perceived client organizational support and attractiveness of the client organization relate positively to employees' affective commitment to the client organization. Furthermore, affective contractor commitment explained unique variation in client affective commitment beyond that accounted for by the client-based predictors, suggesting that employees' commitment to their own contracting organization is important to explaining employees' commitment to the client organization. We suggest that a greater reliance on social exchange theory may provide a basis for understanding commitment in its different forms and foci.

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1. Introduction

Many new employee–employment relationships are presently evolving and one of the newest and fastest growing forms involves the use of third parties who place employees with client organizations on a long-term basis (Connelly & Gallagher, 2004; George, 2003; Lepak, Takeuchi, & Snell, 2003). In this study, we focus on such an employment relationship where a contractor (e.g., a professional employer organization) agrees to handle a set of work responsibilities on a long-term basis for a client organization at their work location. The contractor supplies the employees and is the legal employer of record. In other words, the contractor and the client organization formulate a shared employer relationship vis-à-vis the contracted employee, creating a triangular system of employment relations (Kalleberg, Reskin, & Hudson, 2000; McKeown, 2003). Such arrangements have proven to be confusing even to employees themselves as some will regard their contractor as their employer while others see their client organization as the main point of reference (Rubery, Carroll, Cooke, Grugulis, & Earnshaw, 2004).

Organizational commitment to an employer is a well-established construct in the literature, with antecedents and consequences of organizational commitment relatively well known. However, little is known about organizational commitment among employees working under contracted conditions. In some ways these employees resemble temporary workers but their expectation of employment with a single client over an extended time makes their situation unique but increasingly common. In addition, there is evidence to suggest that contracted employees develop feelings of commitment toward the client organization but that the antecedents and consequences of client-based organizational commitment are not well understood (McElroy, Morrow, & Laczniak, 2001). This paper seeks to fill this void in our understanding. More specifically, the purpose of this paper is to examine (a) how affective organizational commitment and affective client commitment are interrelated and (b) to identify antecedents of client affective commitment among contracted employees.

We propose two broad categories of antecedents to explain client affective commitment: how contracted employees regard their formal employer, the contractor, and, second, contracted employees' perceptions of the client organization. With respect to the first category, we theorize that contractor organizational commitment relates positively to client commitment and that contractor organizational commitment mediates the effects of how employees feel they are treated by the contracting organization (i.e., the extent to which their psychological contract is fulfilled) on their client affective commitment.

Turning to the second category of antecedents, we have already noted that antecedents of client commitment have seldom been studied. This component of our research is thus more exploratory in nature. McElroy et al. (2001) proposed that favorable impressions of a client organization would be positively related to client organization commitment. Three such perceptions were selected for examination in this study. The first is the extent to which a client organization is perceived to value contracted employees' contributions and care about their well-being, generally referred to as perceived organizational support (POS; Eisenberger, Huntington, Hutchison, & Sowa, 1986). The second is the perceived attractiveness of a client organization (i.e., the extent to which it is seen as a good place to work), and the third is how favorable the nature of the relationship between the contractor and the client organization is perceived to be. We hypothesize that perceptions of client organizational support, attractiveness of the client organization and favorableness of the perceived working relationship will each relate positively to client affective commitment.

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