External organizational commitment

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Abstract

Building on the organizational commitment literature and recent management practices like relationship marketing and total quality management, a new focus of work commitment is proposed: external organizational commitment (EOC). It is envisioned as a global construct and defined as an employee's identification and involvement with another organization. A model of EOC specifying its antecedents, consequences, and moderating factors is offered and 28 propositions emanating from the model are articulated. Implications for human resource practitioners are discussed. © 2001 Elsevier Science Inc. All rights reserved.

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1. Introduction

There have been two main approaches to the study of work commitment. One such approach, advocated by Morrow (1983, 1993), considers commitment to work as consisting of a constellation of commitment constructs. Her model suggests that one's commitment to work consists of four universal forms: work ethic endorsement, career commitment, organizational commitment, and job involvement. These universal forms range from those that are thought to be more dispositional, cultural, and cohort based to those that are more subject to change and influence. Research on these forms of commitment have varied from studies that look at the forms separately, to research on concept redundancy among these forms (e.g., Morrow, Eastman, & McElroy, 1991) to possible interactions among them (e.g.,

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Blau & Boal, 1987, 1989), to Blau's attempt to develop a comprehensive measure of commitment (Blau, Paul, & St. John, 1993).

A second approach to the study of work commitment is a constituency approach. This approach suggests that a reference point is a necessary ingredient in understanding employee commitment. For example, rather than attempting to analyze an employee's commitment to an entire organization, this approach contends that it is more meaningful to examine an individual's commitment to specific constituencies within the organization separately (Brown, 1996). Reichers' (1985) work on commitment to top management within organizations, Zaccaro and Dobbins' (1989) research on commitment to one's work group, and Becker's (1992) investigation of multiple intraorganizational foci of commitment (i.e., commitment to top management, supervisor, work group) exemplify this line of reasoning.

A goal of this paper is to extend both of these perspectives by looking at external organizational commitment (EOC), or the commitment — loyalty if you will — that an employee of one organization has toward another organization. This involves taking the idea of commitment toward a specific constituent and extending it to the forms of commitment beyond the boundary of a particular organization. As will be discussed, commitment to multiple organizational targets is commonplace in many business settings, especially where organizational representatives serve as boundary spanners with other client organizations (e.g., advertising agencies, accounting organizations, banks and financial service organizations). However, no attempt has yet been made to examine the antecedents or consequences of cultivating strong EOC among boundary-spanning employees.

The idea of being committed toward an external organization is not completely novel, given the long-term interest in union commitment (e.g., Fullagar & Barling, 1989; Gordon, Philpot, Burt, Thompson, & Spiller, 1980). In addition, the marketing and management literatures have demonstrated a renewed interest in the development of interorganizational relationships. For example, the shift from "transactional marketing" to "relationship marketing" is predicated on building long-term enduring relationships with customers (Gronroos, 1990), "to create involvement and product loyalty by building a lasting bond with the customer" (Copulsky & Wolf, 1990, p. 17). The concept of building relationships with external constituents has been extended from building customer loyalty to building working partnerships between organizations, developing strategic alliances between companies, managing just-in-time relationships, and enhancing commitment among members of a distribution channel (Dyer & Singh, 1998; Kim & Frazier, 1997). Interest in these relationships has also been heightened in the management arena by the adoption of total quality management principles that stress close relationships with external customers (Dean & Bowen, 1994) and by research relating the importance of psychological and physical closeness of boundary-spanning employees and customers to customer satisfaction (Pugh, 1999; Schneider, White, & Paul, 1998). All of this research, however, is predicated on building commitment between organizations.

The purpose of this paper is to examine EOC, more formally defined as an employee's identification and involvement with a client organization (e.g., a supplier, customer, or partner organization). Thus, rather than examining organization-to-organization commitment, the present paper focuses on an individual's level of commitment toward an organization external to the one in which he/she is employed. In doing so, we will use Reichers' (1985) notion of