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Journal of Business Research 56 (2003) 1021–1030

JOURNAL OF BUSINESS RESEARCH

Organizational commitment and performance among guest workers and citizens of an Arab country

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Abstract

The relationships among affective organizational commitment, guest workers status, and two dimensions of individual performance (overall and helping) were explored in a unique international setting. Employees and supervisors ($N=226$) at two commercial banks in the United Arab Emirates (U.A.E.) participated in the study. With a dissonance perspective as a backdrop, it was predicted that U.A.E. nationals, with substantial economic security and choice, would maintain more attitude–behavior consistency than guest workers, employed under highly restrictive work visas. Organizational commitment–guest worker status interactions were significant predictors of overall performance and helping, and partially supported the dissonance perspective. Implications are discussed and future research directions identified.
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Keywords: Organizational commitment; Performance; International

1. Introduction

Interest in the determinants and consequences of organization commitment has increased rapidly in the past several years. Much of this research was aimed at establishing the link between organizational commitment and employee turnover, a relationship that receives considerable empirical support (Mathieu and Zajac, 1990; Meyer et al., 1989; Morrow, 1993). Interestingly, there is comparatively little research that examines the organizational commitment–performance relationship (Meyer et al., 1989). This is likely attributable, in part, to the fact that several early studies failed to demonstrate a significant organizational commitment–performance relationship (Angle and Lawson, 1994; Randall, 1990). Indeed, Mathieu and Zajac's (1990) meta-analysis indicated only a weak direct relationship (r=.05) between commitment and measures of individual performance. However, design shortcomings and other ambiguities may have contributed to null findings in several studies, leading some to suggest that the commitment–performance relationship may still be an important component of organizational dynamics. Several guidelines for future commitment–performance research have been proposed. Researchers suggest that our understanding of this relationship will be enhanced by the identification and investigation of potential moderators (Mathieu and Zajac, 1990), examination of specific, in addition to general, performance dimensions (Angle and Lawson, 1994), and by investigation in various types of organizational settings (Brett et al., 1995).

We follow these suggestions in this study. Specifically, we further research on the relationship between organizational commitment and performance by examining the relationship between commitment and two dimensions of employee performance. We conduct this investigation in a unique international setting, the United Arab Emirates (U.A.E.). The dynamics of organizational commitment outside of North America has received only scant attention (Alvi and Ahmed, 1987; Luthans et al., 1985) and is a pressing need (Leong et al., 1994). In doing so, we use a dissonance perspective to explore the moderating role of "guest worker" or expatriate status between commitment and performance. The majority of the residents of the U.A.E. and the majority of the working population (>90%) are guest workers, from countries such as India

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0148-2963/03/$ – see front matter © 2003 Elsevier Science Inc. All rights reserved.
doi:10.1016/S0148-2963(01)00316-2

and Sri Lanka, seeking financial opportunity (*Gone Away*, 1993). U.A.E. nationals receive different treatment, including substantial job and financial security, under the law. Conversely, guest workers in several Arabian Gulf countries, including the U.A.E., are employed under restrictive work visas that often stipulate deportation if the employment contract is ended (Bhuian and Abdul-Muhmin, 1997; Yavas et al., 1990). These conditions suggest that the relationship between organizational commitment and performance is likely to be quite different for U.A.E. nationals and guest workers, which provides a unique opportunity to explore guest worker status as a moderator of the commitment–performance relationship.

In the following section, the relevant organizational commitment literature is briefly reviewed. Next, a theory tying organizational commitment to individual performance is developed. Finally, a hypothesis regarding the moderating role of guest worker status (i.e., the guest worker commitment hypothesis) between commitment and performance is explored.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Summary of organizational commitment literature

Researchers have taken many strides in delineating different types of commitment. Morris and Sherman (1981) proposed that most theorists either favor an exchange approach, in which commitment is the result of investments or contributions to the organization, or a psychological approach, in which commitment is depicted as a positive, high-involvement, high-intensity orientation (Mayer and Schoorman, 1992) toward the organization. The latter is the predominant view of commitment, one of identification with the organization and commitment to organizational goals (Hackett et al., 1994; Mowday et al., 1982). This psychological commitment to the organization has been dubbed *affective* commitment (Gregersen and Black, 1992; Mayer and Schoorman, 1992; McGee and Ford, 1987).

Another major view of commitment evolved from Becker's (1960) work, which conceptualized commitment as an accumulation of interests (side bets) or sunk costs with the organization (Hrebiniak and Alutto, 1972; Ritzer and Trice, 1969). Several empirical studies have demonstrated the existence of this factor (e.g., Allen and Meyer, 1990; Angle and Perry, 1981; McGee and Ford, 1987; O'Reilly and Chapman, 1986). The dimension is usually referred to as *continuance* commitment, or an individual's bond to the organization because of extraneous interests (e.g., pensions, seniority, family concerns) rather than a general positive feeling or affect toward the organization (Hrebiniak and Alutto, 1972; McGee and Ford, 1987; Ritzer and Trice, 1969). Allen and Meyer (1990) further developed the idea of normative commitment or commitment arising from the internalization of normative pressures and organizational socialization.

Of these commitment dimensions, *affective* commitment shows the most promise as a predictor of individual performance (Brett et al., 1995; Angle and Lawson, 1994) and it is this dimension that is the focus of our study. There is some evidence of a positive correlation between affective commitment and performance, i.e., employees who are affectively committed to the organization tend to perform better than those who are not (e.g., Meyer et al., 1989; Mowday et al., 1974; Steers, 1977). This link is usually theoretically justified with a motivational argument. Those committed to organizational goals are likely to work harder (Chelte and Tausky, 1986; Leong et al., 1994; Zahra, 1984) and more consistently with organizational expectations (Leong et al., 1994; Sujan, 1986; Weitz et al., 1986) than those who are not. Assuming a minimum ability level is met (Campbell et al., 1993; Porter and Lawler, 1968), high levels of organizational commitment should result in higher levels of performance (Angle and Lawson, 1994).

Although some significant relationships have been found, the magnitudes of the direct relationships between affective commitment and performance are generally small (Larsen and Fukami, 1984). This fact led researchers to explore the dynamics of different performance dimensions (Angle and Lawson, 1994; Meyer et al., 1989) and to investigate moderators of the commitment–performance relationship (Brett et al., 1995; Mathieu and Zajac, 1990). Indeed, identifying substantive constraints that diminish the observed relationship between attitudes and behavior is considered a critical need in organizational research (Johns, 1991). Each of these issues is discussed in the following sections.

2.2. Affective commitment and dimensions of employee performance

Despite difficulties in the measurement of individual performance (Austin and Villanova, 1992; Campbell et al., 1993; Dunnette, 1963; Ostroff, 1992) and small observed correlations between attitudes and performance (Angle and Lawson, 1994; Bateman and Organ, 1983; Organ, 1988; Puffer, 1987), researchers continue theoretical and empirical pursuit of these relationships. In this research, we examine two dimensions of performance, commonly studied in the management and psychology literature. These dimensions are not meant to run the gamut of all possible dimensions, but are meant to sample from the relevant dimensions of job performance. We examine in-role or formal job performance (Williams and Anderson, 1991) and helping or citizenship behavior (Organ, 1994; O'Reilly and Chapman, 1986). Although distinctions among different types of performance were made decades ago (e.g., Katz, 1964), only recently have empirical examinations confirmed the quasi-independence of these dimensions (e.g., O'Reilly and Chapman, 1986; Smith et al., 1983; Williams and Anderson, 1991).

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