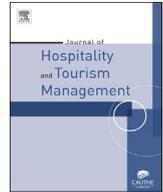




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Coworker support and organisational commitment: A comparative study of Thai employees working in Thai and American airlines



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ABSTRACT

The importance of organisational commitment is simultaneously witnessed and empirically supported, with social support revealed as a significant determinant. A number of studies have examined the effect of culture on the development of employees' level of commitment to an organisation. These studies typically focus on culture at either the individual or the national level. However, in an organisational culture context, the literature regarding its influence on commitment remains limited. Therefore, the primary objective of this study is to explore whether the influence of coworker support on the three dimensions of organisational commitment differs amongst Thai flight attendants working in organisations with different cultural orientations. Using a self-administered questionnaire survey, data was collected from a sample of 439 Thai cabin service attendants from two major flag-carrier airlines (one based in Thailand and the other based in the USA). In general, results of structural equation modelling analysis reveal significant differences with regard to influences of coworker support on organisational commitment amongst the two sample groups. Significant relationships between coworker support and affective and normative components of organisational commitment were found in the Thai sample whereas such relationships were not statistically significant in the US sample. However, negative influence of coworker support on continuance commitment was found amongst Thai employees working in the American airline. These results are discussed in light of their theoretical contribution and managerial implications.

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1. Introduction

Organisational commitment is a job attitude that has attracted considerable research attention amongst management theorists because it affects important work-related behaviours (Meyer & Allen, 1997). On the one hand, empirical studies, along with meta-analyses, show that organisational commitment is positively associated with organisationally desirable outcomes such as job performance, market orientation, organisational citizenship behaviour (OCB) and participation in organisational change activities. On the other hand, empirical evidence indicates negative associations between organisational commitment and counterproductive work attitudes and behaviours, such as turnover intention and absenteeism (see Cohen & Caspary, 2011; Limpanitgul, Jirotmontree,

Robson, & Boonchoo, 2013; Limpanitgul, Robson, Gould-Williams, & Lertthaitrakul, 2013; Meyer, Stanley, Herscovitch, & Topolnytsky, 2002; Oyeniyi, 2013; Riketta, 2002; Yucel, 2012). Indeed, many organisations search for ways to develop their employees' level of organisational commitment. However, the effort to promote organisational commitment amongst employees will be effective only if it is based on a sound understanding of the relevant variables, including both determinants and contingent factors (Aube, Rousseau, & Morin, 2007; Rousseau & Aube, 2010). While the body of research on organisational commitment has developed and matured, it seems that scholars now widely accept the notion that the organisational commitment construct is multi-faceted in nature (Meyer et al., 2002). On the basis of the existing literature, Allen and Meyer have proposed and refined the three-component model of commitment, which consists of affective, continuance and normative commitments (Allen & Meyer, 1996; Meyer & Allen, 1991, 1997). Given the conceptual differences in the three components, each may develop from a significantly different stream of antecedents (Meyer & Allen, 1991). Notwithstanding the multidimensionality of

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organisational commitment, only a few studies have simultaneously investigated all three components of organisational commitment (Chen & Francesco, 2003; Meyer, Allen, & Smith, 1993). In addition, in comparison to research on organisational commitment in Western context, such research outside of a Western business context is relatively limited (Francesco & Chen, 2004; Meyer et al., 2002); therefore, further investigation is warranted to enhance our understanding of the relationship between the different components of organisational commitment and their antecedents in non-Western settings.

Social support in the workplace has been identified as comprising a prevalent stream of factors influencing employees' level of commitment to an organisation. The shift of job content from steady and routine individual tasks to more complex and collective tasks (Harrison, Johns, & Martocchio, 2000) has enhanced coworkers' salience and their essential influence (Chiaburu & Harrison, 2008). Coworkers are not only an important part of the social environment; they can also literally define it (Schneider, 1987). Scholars observe that service employees who experience conflict between their true feelings and their expressed feelings—emotional labour (see, e.g., Hochschild, 1983), often form a community with fellow coworkers in which they can express their true feelings in order to cope and thus reduce stress at work (Hochschild, 1983; Korczynski, 2003). Furthermore, coworkers themselves influence their working environment, and depending on whether the influence is perceived as positive or negative, this will further affect employee attitudes at work. Recent attention has focused on the supportive relationships that may develop amongst coworkers, and researchers have produced evidence that coworker support can be beneficial for worker well-being (Sloan, 2012). According to Thoits (1983), the provision of support from people who are similar to the support recipients and who share similar work experiences is likely to be more effective than the support received from persons in out-groups. Past research focused primarily on the main effects of coworker support on organisational commitment (see, e.g., Rafferty & Griffin, 2004). Therefore, it remains to be seen whether employees from the same nation will share similar attitudinal and behavioural development in different organisations.

Consequently, the primary goal of the present study is to examine how coworker support influences the development of organisational commitment amongst Thai employees working in Thai and American airlines. As the sample of study are Thai people who are characterised by a collectivist national culture (i.e. the extent to which people emphasise their group interests over those of their own), the organisational settings considered appropriate for investigation of the organisational culture effect are organisations with a working culture that is in accord with the employees' cultural orientation, and those with the opposite cultural orientation. Therefore, a Thai airline and a US airline are selected to represent a collectivist-oriented organisation and an individualist-oriented organisation, respectively. On the one hand, individualism reflects the extent to which people emphasise their own goals over those of their group. Members who strive to achieve their own personal goals characterise individualistic cultures. Members who focus on the needs of the group over their own interests, by contrast, characterise collectivist cultures. This investigation will fill the current void in the literature and organisations in pursuit of employee commitment will thus be better informed and better able to derive stronger commitment amongst employees in a more positive manner. Specifically, this study provides empirical evidence about the development of organisational commitment amongst Thai employees working in a collectivist organisation *vis-à-vis* those working in an individualist organisation.

Following the literature review and the hypothesis development, we introduce our theoretical model. The paper then

describes the measurement process, including the sample characteristics obtained from two major flag-carrier airlines; these characteristics were designed to test our proposed model and hypotheses. Finally, we present the results, conclude the paper with a discussion of the implications and limitations of the findings and suggest avenues for future research.

2. Literature review and hypothesis development

2.1. Organisational commitment

As with other topics in the study of organisational behaviour, a wide variety of definitions and measures of organisational commitment exist (see, e.g., Becker, Randall, & Riegel, 1995). It is noted that 'researchers from various disciplines ascribed their own meaning to the topic (that is, commitment), thereby increasing the difficulty involved in understanding the construct' (Mowday, Porter, & Steers, 1982, p. 20). However, as the body of research on organisational commitment has developed and matured, a three-component model of organisational commitment was also introduced and started to gain wider acceptance in the literature (Allen & Meyer, 1996, 1991, 1997). Indeed, there is considerable research support for this three-component conceptualisation of organisational commitment (Cichy, Cha, & Kim, 2009) and its generalisability across cultures (e.g. Ko, Price, & Mueller, 1997; Lee, Allen, Meyer, & Rhee, 2001). This model consists of affective, continuance, and normative components of commitment, which can be defined as follows:

Affective commitment refers to the employee's emotional attachment to, identification with, and involvement in the organisation. Employees with strong affective commitment continue employment with the organisation because they want to do so. Continuance commitment refers to an awareness of the costs associated with leaving the organisation. Employees whose primary link to the organisation is based on continuance commitment remain because they need to do so. Finally, normative commitment reflects a feeling of obligation to continue employment. Employees with a high level of normative commitment feel that they ought to remain with the organisation. (Meyer & Allen, 1991, p. 67)

Specifically, the basis for affective commitment is an individual's own personal desire to be part of the organisation, which is based largely on an emotional attachment to the organisation. In contrast, continuance commitment is based primarily on an exchange between the individual and the organisation, which results from an individual choosing to continue to work for the organisation because the benefits of doing so outweigh the costs, or because the costs of leaving the organisation are greater than its benefits (Kwantes, 2003). The foundation of normative commitment is the belief that employees have a responsibility to the organisation; that is, employees 'ought' to be committed to the organisation. It is a reflection of the employee's perception of the norm (Kwantes, 2003). With reference to the three components, it has been argued that an employee's relationship with an organisation may simultaneously reflect varying degrees of affective, continuance and normative commitment (Meyer & Allen, 1991). Therefore, the influence of a given factor on different facets of organisational commitment is likely to vary.

2.2. Coworker support and organisational commitment

In service organisations, coworker support is considered to be an important source of employee support (Suskind, Kacmar, & Borchgrevink, 2007). Coworker support is defined as 'employees'

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