CAREER STAGES AND ORGANIZATIONAL COMMITMENT: A CASE OF MALAYSIAN MANAGERS

Fauziah Noordin (Corresponding Author)
Universiti Teknologi MARA
International Education College
Universiti Teknologi MARA Section 17 Campus
40200 Shah Alam, Selangor, Malaysia
MALAYSIA
E-mail: fauziah716@salam.uitm.edu.my, Phone+60-3-55227001

Abdul Rahman Abdul Rahim
Universiti Teknologi MARA
Faculty of Business Management
Universiti Teknologi MARA
40450 Shah Alam, Selangor, Malaysia

Abu Hassan Ibrahim
Universiti Teknologi MARA
Faculty of Business Management
Universiti Teknologi MARA
40450 Shah Alam, Selangor, Malaysia

Mohd Shukri Omar
Universiti Teknologi MARA
Universiti Teknologi MARA Kelantan
Bukit Ilmu
18500 Machang, Kelantan, Malaysia

ABSTRACT

This paper reports a study of career-stage effects on organizational commitment among Malaysian managers. The main aim of this study is to examine the relationship between career stage and organizational commitment and to determine the effects of career stage on organizational commitment. Organizational commitment was measured using the 24-item scale developed by Allen and Meyer. This scale measures affective, continuance, and normative organizational commitment. Career stage was operationalized on the basis of three criteria: age, organizational tenure, and positional tenure. In this study, it appears that neither organizational tenure nor positional tenure significantly affected any of the components of organizational commitment among the Malaysian managers. Only age was found to have a significant effect on these managers, and it is limited to the affective component of organizational commitment.

Key words: Affective commitment, continuance commitment, normative commitment, career stages

1. Introduction

Literature is inundated with studies on organizational commitment. From these studies, it appears that three general themes of organizational commitment have emerged. These are affective attachment, perceived costs, and obligation (Allen and Meyer, 1990; Mowday, et al., 1982; Turner, Parish, Caldwallader, and Busch, 2008; Noordin and Williams, 2004). It is firmly believed that the commitment of employees is important to organizations. Employees who are committed to an organization are likely to want to serve it better, as such costs commonly associated with human resources, such as absenteeism, turnover, and low motivation will be reduced. Allen and Meyer (1993) suggest that being able to anticipate the course of work attitudes over career stages would be useful for both employers and employees. If particular work experiences are more closely linked to work attitudes in some career stages than in others, it might be possible to manage work experiences at different career stages to promote desired attitudes. Previous studies suggest that work related attitudes of workers in later career stages deserve particular attention for several reasons, including the need of many organizations to influence retirement decisions (Morrow, 1982), concern over quality of work life issues, and demographic projections indicating that workers will not be able to progress upward through organizational hierarchies at the rate of the previous generation (Drucker, 1984).

Studies have also suggested that career stage moderates the relationships between attitudes and work behavior (Blackburn and Fox, 1983; Gould and Hawkins, 1978; Slocum and Cron, 1985; Stumpf and Robinowitz, 1981). These findings have refueled an interest in how high levels of organizational commitment can be achieved and maintained over time. Individualism and collectivism are theorized to have an impact on work values (Erez and Earley, 1987). The prevailing view seems to be that levels of organizational commitment in the Asian countries are influenced by their collectivist orientation. In individualistic societies, affection, autonomy, and equity in exchange are salient, whereas collectivists emphasize skills development, prestige, and the well-being and goals of in-groups. Individualists stress the opportunity to "do their own thing," which is reflected in autonomous work, decentralized decision-making, and incentive systems that reward individual action and accomplishment. Furthermore, Allen, Miller, and Nath (1988) note that, in countries where individualism dominates, individuals view their relationship with the organization from a calculative perspective whereas, in collectivist societies, the ties between the individual and the organization have a moral component. This suggests that the concept of organizational commitment carries very different meanings in collectivist and individualist societies. Employees who have collectivist values commit to organizations primarily due to their ties with managers, owners, co-workers (collectivism), and much less due to the job itself or the particular compensation scheme (individualistic incentives) (Boyacigiller and Adler, 1991).

According to Earley (1989), American theoretical structures have failed to include a full range of explanations for organizational commitment. As a result, our present knowledge of the generalisability of observed relationships and boundary condition of theories of organizational commitment is limited.

Boyacigiller and Adler (1991) comment that the dimension of individualism versus collectivism may have particular relevance for organizational commitment researchers. Randall (1993) theorizes that a country's individualism-collectivism score may be associated with different levels and types of organizational commitment. She further states that it can be anticipated that employees in collectivist cultures would reflect higher levels of organizational commitment than employees in individualistic cultures. It can also be anticipated that there will be greater affective attachment (a sense of loyalty) to institutions in collectivistic cultures, and greater calculative involvement (a cost-benefit approach) with institutions in individualistic cultures. The purpose of this study is to examine the influence of career stage on organizational commitment of managers in Malaysia. Similar to Allen and Meyer (1993), the study seeks to advance our understanding of the relationship by considering multiple components of organizational commitment and multiple operationalizations of the career stage construct.

2. Theory and Hypotheses

Organizational commitment has been examined extensively (for example, Allen and Meyer, 1993; Mathieu and Zajac, 1990; Meyer et al., 1990; Meyer, et al., 2007; Steers, Mowday, and Shapiro, 2004) and it has been defined in several different ways. These various definitions share a common theme in that organizational commitment is considered to be a bond or linking of the individual to the organization. The definitions differ only in terms of how this bond is considered to have developed. The two commonly studied types of organizational commitment are attitudinal and calculative commitment. Attitudinal commitment is defined as "the relative strength of an individual's identification with and involvement in a particular organization" (Mowday et al, 1982, p.27). Calculative commitment (Becker, 1960) is defined as "a structural phenomenon which occurs as a result of individual-organizational transactions and alterations in side-bets or investments over time" (Hrebiniak and Alutto, 1972, p. 556). Over the years, other types of organizational commitment have emerged. These include normative commitment (Wiener, 1982) and organizational identification (Hall, Schneider, and Nygren, 1970). But according to Mathieu and Zajac (1990), these other forms of organizational commitment have either been subsumed into the attitudinal or calculative definitions, or distinguished from commitment to the organization and treated as correlates.

Allen and Meyer (1990) developed a three-component theory of organizational commitment (affective, continuance, and normative commitment) which stimulated recognition of the multidimensionality of the measure. According to Allen and Meyer (1991), affective commitment refers to the employee's emotional attachment to, identification with, and involvement in the organization. Employees with a strong affective commitment continue employment with the organization because they *want* to do so. Continuance commitment refers to an awareness of the costs associated with leaving the organization. Employees whose primary link to the organization is based on continuance commitment remain because they *need* to do so. 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 organization. According to Allen and Meyer (1990), the three dimensions provide valuable insight into the employee-organization link, and a more comprehensive understanding of this link is achieved when all three are considered simultaneously.

Allen and Meyer (1993) note that research examining the relationships between work attitudes and career stages have focused on two related issues. One is whether there are changes in work attitudes that occur as employees proceed from one career stage to another. The other issue involves the possibility that particular work experiences are differentially related to work attitudes at different career stages. A number of studies have suggested that career stages predicted the relationship between work attitude and behaviors (for example, Allen and Meyer, 1993; McElroy, et al., 1999; Bassham, 2009). According to Bassham (2009), attitudes and behaviors, known as psychological linkage between employee and organization, have been quantified using various scales and measures. Such studies (for example, Gonzales and Guillen, 2008; Mowday, et al., 1982; Porter and Lawler III, 1968; Porter, Steers, Mowday, and Boulian, 1974; steers and Mowday, 1987; Tomas and Manuel, 2008) have shown that employee attitudes and behaviors vary over time spent on job. A basic finding of much research on work attitudes is that older workers are, in general, more committed to their employing organizations and more satisfied with their jobs (see, Angle and Perry, 1983; Hrebiniak and Alutto, 1972; Sheldon, 1971; Tayeb, 1988).

Moreover, a positive relationship between age and commitment has been found in different cultures. Lincoln and Kalleberg (1985) report that, in their samples of manufacturing employees in the US and Japan, older people are both more committed and more satisfied than younger employees. Allen and Meyer (1993) found that both affective and normative organizational commitment were significantly higher in older than younger employees. Sommer, Bae, and Luthans (1996) found that older Korean employees reported higher commitment than younger respondents. Mannheim, Baruch, and Tal (1997) found that age was positively related to organizational commitment. Meyer and Allen (1984) suggest that older workers become more attitudinally committed to an organization for a variety of reasons, including greater satisfaction with their jobs, gaining advancement, and having "cognitively justified" their remaining in an organization. Salancik (1977) also suggests that the positive relationship between age and commitment could be due to self-justification processes ("I have been here for 20 years, I must like it"). It should also be noted that over time, less committed employees are more likely to leave their organizations.

Other researchers (for example, March and Simon, 1958) have suggested that age should be more highly related to calculative organizational commitment. This relationship is typically attributed to limited alternative opportunities and greater sunk costs in later years. Furthermore, age might also be associated with continuance organizational commitment because it serves as a proxy for the investments one makes in one's organization (Meyer and Allen, 1984). However, Mathieu and Zajac's (1990) in their review and meta-analysis of antecedents, correlates and consequences of organizational commitment, report that age is significantly more related to attitudinal than to calculative organizational commitment. Studies have also found that commitment increases with organizational and positional tenure (Luthans, Black, and Taylor, 1987; Stevens, Beyer, and Trice, 1978). Mathieu and Zajac (1990) found that positional tenure was significantly and positively related to attitudinal organizational commitment, suggesting that years spent in a particular position may build an employee's psychological attachment to the organization. They also found that organizational tenure tended to be more related to organizational commitment than did positional tenure, but both effects were reported to be small. Allen and Meyer (1993) found that employees with longer tenure in organizations had significantly higher affective organizational commitment.

Findings in the literature suggest that when employers could identify the type of commitment their employees held at a particular age, organizational tenure, or positional tenure, then an appropriate stimulus of incentives could be initiated to increase efficiency and productivity (Gonzales and Guillen, 2008; Mowday, et al., 1982; Tomas and Manuel, 2008). However, according to Morrow and McElroy (1987), inconsistencies and diversity of career stages have hampered the comparison across the examined variables of work attitudes and career stages. Boyacigiller and Adler (1991) proposed that Hofstede's dimension of individualism versus collectivism may have particular relevance for cross-cultural organizational commitment research. Hofstede (1980) members of collectivist cultures (for example, Malaysia) are characterized as having a "we" rather than an "I" orientation, having high loyalty towards the organization and its goals, seeing themselves as interdependent with others, taking action jointly on a cooperative rather than competitive basis, and as valuing joint efforts and group rewards. As such, one would anticipate greater sense of loyalty, or normative commitment, to organizations in collectivist. Boyacigiller and Adler (1991) argue that the commitment of employees with collectivist values may arise from ties with managers, owners, and co-workers, whereas the commitment of employees with an individualist orientation may be due to the job itself or the compensation system (see also Randall, 1993). On the basis of the previous research reviewed above, the study tested the following hypotheses:

1. Older Malaysian respondents would express stronger affective and normative organizational commitment than younger Malaysian respondents.
2. Respondents with longer organizational tenure would express stronger organizational commitment than respondents with shorter organizational tenure.
3. Respondents with longer positional tenure would express stronger organizational commitment than respondents with shorter positional tenure.

3. Methodology

3.1 Data Gathering Procedure

A mail survey was administered in accordance with the principles and procedures advocated by Dillman (1977) and the administrative procedure recommended by Chan (1992). All responses were voluntary and anonymous. The average age of the Malaysian respondents was 39.3 years. There were more males than female respondents (male = 72.9%; female = 27.1%). Sixty-eight percent of respondents were university graduates.The work demographics indicate that respondents, on the average, have worked for their current organizations longer (8.7 years). On the average, the respondents appear to be less mobile that is, working on average for one organization only.

3.2 Assessment Instruments

Organizational commitment was measured using the 24-item scale developed by Allen and Meyer (1990). This scale measures affective, continuance, and normative organizational commitment. Affective organizational commitment refers to the employee's emotional attachment to, identification with, and involvement in the organization. Continuance organizational commitment refers to an awareness of the costs associated with leaving the organization. Normative organizational commitment reflects a feeling of obligation to remain with the organization (Allen and Meyer, 1990). Career stage was operationalized on the basis of three criteria: age, organizational tenure, and positional tenure. In accordance to Morrow and McElroy (1987), age was measured using respondents' self-reported age and ages were grouped into the trial stage (less than 31 years old), the stabilization stage (31 – 44 years), and the maintenance stage (over 44 years). These particular age groupings are identical to those used by Allen and Meyer (1993), Morrow and McElroy (1987), Gould (1979), and Slocum and Cron (1985) facilitating comparisons across studies.

Organizational tenure was measured using respondents' self-reported years of working in the organization. Groupings employed were 2 years or less for the establishment stage, over 2 years and up to 10 years for the advancement stage, and over 10 years for the maintenance stage. The same groupings were used in previous research by Allen and Meyer (1993), Morrow and McElroy (1987), Mount (1984), Stumpf and Rabinowitz (1981) and Gould and Hawkins (1978).Positional tenure was measured using respondents' self-reports. The groupings were also in three stages: the orientation stage (2 years or less), growth stage (over 2 to 10 years), and the plateau stage (more than 10 years). These groupings are identical to those used by Allen and Meyer (1993) and Morrow and McElroy (1987).

4. Results

4.1 Means, Standard Deviations, Reliabilities, and Correlations

Table 1 shows the means, standard deviations, reliabilities and correlations of the measures. Internal consistency estimates (alpha coefficients) obtained in several studies employing the organizational commitment scales range from .74 to .89 for affective commitment, .69 to .84 for continuance commitment, and .69 to .79 for normative commitment (Allen and Meyer, 1990; Allen and Smith, 1987; Bobocel, Meyer, and Allen, 1988; McGee and Ford, 1987; Meyer and Allen, 1984, 1986; Meyer et al, 1989; Withey 1988). The reliability estimates in this study are comparable, although the reliabilities of the normative commitment are slightly lower.

Table 1: Means, Standard Deviations, Reliabilities, and Correlations of Measures

Measures	1	2	3	4	5	6	Mean	Std. Dev.
Malaysian (n = 203)								
1. Affective commitment	**.73**						5.35	1.12
2. Continuance commitment	.05	**.74**					4.48	1.23
3. Normative commitment	.24**	.26**	**.66**				4.63	1.26
4. Age	.23**	.01	.20**	-			39.37	7.11
5. Organizational tenure	.11	.02	.19**	.58**	-		11.20	8.71
6. Positional tenure	.08	.01	.06	.31**	.33**	-	3.79	3.65

Note: *p < .05; **p < .01
Reliability estimates (coefficient alpha) are shown in the diagonal.

Table 2 shows the means for the affective, continuance, and normative scores of the respondents within each career stage, as well as a summary of the results of analyses of variance comparing each organizational commitment components across each career stage. For the respondents, affective commitment is significantly higher in the "older than 44 years" group than in the younger respondents. Affective commitment did not show any differences in organizational tenure (OT) and positional tenure (PT). Continuance commitment and normative commitment do not differ across age, OT, and PT groups.

Table 2: Organizational Commitment Components at Three Age (AG1, AG2, AG3), Organizational Tenure (OT1, OT2, OT3), and Positional Tenure (PT1, PT2, PT3) Levels:

Sample and Commitment Components	Levels of the Career Stage Variables								
	AG1	AG2	AG3	OT1	OT2	OT3	PT1	PT2	PT3
Malaysia (N = 203):									
Affective	4.92^a	5.24^a	5.81^b	5.15	5.30	5.46	5.19	5.38	5.78
Continuance	4.75	4.42	4.51	4.82	4.34	4.51	4.58	4.42	4.50
Normative	4.40	4.55	4.95	4.23	4.52	4.84	4.36	4.75	4.77

Note: Within each commitment component/career stage grouping (e.g., Affective commitment/Age), those means with different superscripts differ significantly ($p < .05$). Those that share a superscript, or for which no superscripts appear, are not significantly different from each other ($p > .05$).

For employee age: AG1 =< 31 years; AG2 =31 – 44 years; and AG3 => 44 years.

For organizational and positional tenure: OT1/PT1 =< 2 years; OT1/PT1 = 2 – 10 years; and OT1.PT1 => 10 years.

Table 3 shows the correlations between each organizational commitment component and each career stage variable. Also shown are the correlations between the components of organizational commitment and each career stage variables with the other two career stage variables partialled out. This allows us to evaluate the link between each career stage variable independently of the other two (Allen and Meyer, 1993).

Table 3 indicates that continuance commitment is strongly related to age. When either OT or PT is partialled out, the correlations between affective commitment and age were reduced only slightly. It appears that normative commitment is strongly related to age and PT but not to OT. When OT is partialled out, the correlations between age and normative commitment became insignificant but, when PT was partialled out, the correlations between age and normative commitment reduced only slightly. The results also show that normative commitment has a significant correlation with OT, but the relationship became negligible when age was partialled out and, when PT was partialled out, the correlation was reduced, indicating a weak relationship.

Table 3: Correlations and Partial Correlations between Career Stages Variables and Affective, Continuance, and Normative Commitment

Career Stage Variable(s)	ACS	CCS	NCS
Age	.23**	.01	.20**
Age (OT)	.20**	-.01	.11
Age (PT)	.21**	.00	.19**
Age (OT/PT)	.23**	-.01	.11
OT	.11	.02	.19**
OT (Age)	-.02	.02	.09
OT (PT)	.09	.02	.18*
OT (Age/PT)	-.02	.02	.09
PT	.08	.01	.06
PT (Age)	.01	.01	.00
PT (OT)	.04	-.00	.00
PT (Age/OT)	.01	.00	-.01

Note: Variables in parentheses have been partialled out. OT = organizational tenure; PT = positional tenure; ACS = affective commitment score; CCS = continuance commitment score; NCS = normative commitment score.
*$p < .05$; **$p < .01$; ***$p < .001$

5. Conclusion and Discussion

The main aim of this study is to examine the relationship between career stage and organizational commitment and to determine the effects of career stage on organizational commitment. The findings support the expectation from previous research that organizational commitment increases with age. In this case, it appears increasing age leads to significantly stronger affective commitment. Previous research suggests that older people are more collectivistic than younger people (Yamaguchi, 1994; Triandis et al., 1988), and a positive relationship between collectivism and affective organizational commitment has been widely proposed in the literature (Randall, 1993; Hofstede, 1984; Harisson, 1995; Boyacigiller and Adler, 1991; Hjelholt, 1972). The finding that Malaysian managers in the "greater than 44 years" age group report a significantly higher level of affective organizational commitment than do the younger age groups supports the first hypothesis.

However, the finding that normative commitment is not significantly stronger among older Malaysian managers fails to support the first hypothesis. Allen and Meyer (1993) suggest that positive correlations between age and affective commitment might exist because (1) something about aging per se predisposes older employees to be more committed to organizations ("maturity"), (2) older employees actually have, or perceive themselves to have, more positive experiences in organizations than younger employees ("better experiences"), and (3) there are generational differences in organizational commitment ("cohort"). The finding for affective commitment in the Malaysian sample is consistent with this theory. The finding is also consistent with the expectation that affective commitment will be higher in collectivistic than in individualistic cultures. Malaysians, regardless of ethnicity, are generally group-oriented (Asma, 1992). A person has no real identity unless he/she belongs to a collectivity or group, which may include family members, close relatives, friends and even the organization the person works for.

Allen and Meyer (1993) also suggest that normative commitment may increase with age, and the theory of individualism-collectivism argues that the sense of moral obligation to organizations is stronger in collectivistic than in individualistic cultures (Triandis, 1995). Asma (1992) argues that there is a moral component in the relationship between Malaysian employers and employees that is similar to the relationship of a child with the extended family. The employer is expected to protect the employees almost regardless of the employees' performance, and the employee is expected to reciprocate by professing loyalty to his/her employer and organization. We might expect, therefore, that normative commitment would increase with age among the Malaysian respondents, but this study found that normative commitment was not significantly higher among older Malaysian respondents. One reason for this may be that the conceptual and methodological basis for the expectation is rather weak. Allen and Meyer (1996) conclude, from a review of studies using the three-component commitment model, that the weight of evidence supports the distinction between affective and continuance commitment, but that there may be overlaps between the affective and normative commitment scales. While they found that affective commitment correlated modestly with normative commitment, previous empirical evidence alone does not provide a strong basis for a hypothesis - there also need to be good theoretical reasons. The theory of individualism-collectivism appears to provide these reasons. If sense of moral obligation is stronger in collectivistic societies, it should strengthen with age and, therefore, we should have found normative commitment to be significantly higher among older Malaysian managers than younger managers.

A possible explanation of the actual finding is that the Malaysian culture is changing. The Malaysian economy has gone through rapid development and structural change since Independence in 1957 and there has been a marked rise in real income (Economy of Malaysia, 1997-98; The Star, 2009). A sustained economic success has given birth to increased wealth and sophistication, and the emergence of a middle class based on small families with educated parents who hold good jobs. Triandis (1989) suggests that people become more individualistic in complex affluent societies. This is because they may become members of a larger number of groups while their financial independence allows them to give priority to personal goals over in-group goals, and to join or leave groups according to whether the groups satisfy their personal needs. Hofstede (1980) also suggests that individualism is associated with the growth of national wealth and the development of middle-class values. Moreover, Triandis (1995) argues that individualism-collectivism constructs are situation-specific. For example, a person may behave quite individualistically at work but exhibit collectivist behavior in the extended family (see also, Diaz-Guerrero and Diaz-Loving, 1990; Gorney and Long, 1980). While the Malaysian managers appear to be basically collectivist, economic development and social change may have weakened their normative commitment to their organizations. Increased job insecurity may be a further factor undermining older Malaysian managers' normative commitment to their organizations. In this study, it appears that neither organizational tenure nor positional tenure significantly affected any of the components of organizational commitment among the Malaysian managers.

Only age was found to have a significant effect on these managers, and it is limited to the affective component of organizational commitment. The findings for the Malaysian sample do not support the second and third hypotheses that organizational commitment increases with organizational and positional tenure respectively.

6. *Limitations and Future Studies*

Several limitations exist in the present study which warrants review. First, one difficulty is that the measure used to operationalize the study's conceptualization (that is, organizational commitment) is based entirely upon North American instruments. Given that so little empirical research has been done on the influence of career stages on organizational commitment, the present study provides at least preliminary evidence how members of collectivist culture, like Malaysia may perceive this construct. With the growing importance of the need to understand different cultures, this study supports the notion that more empirical research in this area would be a worthwhile endeavor.

Second, since only managers were used as samples in this study, this raises the issue of generalisability of findings. More research is needed before firm generalizable implications can be drawn. Generalisability of the results of these analyses for employees in other positions or designations remains an open empirical question. Additional replication using a more careful comparison by types of workers and types of occupation would be useful. The overall findings of this study are encouraging. However, by no means are the present results conclusive. Rather, interpretation and specification of the influence career stages on organizational commitment that are empirically examined in the present study must be regarded as tentative.

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