

A QUALITATIVE EXPLORATION OF EMPLOYEES' VIEWS ON ORGANISATIONAL COMMITMENT

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ABSTRACT

It is generally accepted that employee commitment has an impact on the overall functioning of organisations. Therefore, the primary aim of this qualitative explorative study is to detect and describe views of a group of employees at a local Johannesburg retail organisation regarding employee turnover and retention in the organisation. Relevant theoretical key concepts and views of scholars are carefully integrated and described briefly. Qualitative methods were used to collect and analyse the data. The research findings are explicitly outlined and linked to the existing literature on organisational commitment. The article is concluded with some recommendations.

Key words

Organisational commitment, employee turnover, retention

No organisation in today's highly competitive world can perform at peak levels unless each and every employee is committed to its objectives and strategic goals. Faced with ever-increasing competition and preparing for continuous challenges, one of the key components of organisation survival is maintaining and upgrading its important human resources. As businesses face increasing competition, a strategy that will develop commitment and loyal employees holds the promise of exceptional financial returns (Chambers, 1998; Huselid, 1995).

According to Katz (1964) and McElroy (2001) employee behaviour that is essential for organisational effectiveness includes the following:

- Employees entering and remaining with the organisation
- Employees carrying out specific roles
- Employees engaging in innovative and spontaneous activity that goes beyond role prescriptions

The appointment of a good employee is thus critical, but of even greater significance is the organisation's ability to retain the employee by providing a satisfying work environment. The organisation's ability to create a committed workforce is undoubtedly crucial to its success. Hence the need for management to understand the concept of organisational commitment: viz what it is, how it operates, and most importantly, the behaviour exhibited by committed employees (McElroy, 2001).

As measured by increased sales, improved productivity, profitability and enhanced retention, loyal and engaged employees tend to generate high-performance business outcomes (Rogers, 2001; Tsui, Pearce & Porter; 1995). These employees commit themselves to the organisation's vision and mission. Organisational commitment has evolved as a key indicator of employees' attitudes.

High employee commitment is a prominent feature of world-class organisations. Unfortunately, even the best-performing organisations do experience turnover, lack of job satisfaction and commitment-related problems. People still leave highly esteemed organisations, and sometimes join an organisation perceived to be mediocre, leaving management confused. (Jiang & Klein, 2001)

Labour market trends in the retail industry have not only presented increased career opportunities for employees,

but also challenges to organisations in hiring and retaining workers. Kochanski and Ledford's (2001) survey showed that career opportunities yielded more significant predictors of retention than any other type of reward, followed by training opportunities and employee relationship with supervisors. It can therefore be argued that employees' views regarding their attachment to the organisation have remained critical in the workplace, and will do so for the foreseeable future.

In the light of the local scarcity of in-depth knowledge, contributing to irrefutable confusion and insufficient information on organisational commitment and its possible effect on the overall functioning of organisations, this article strives to make a modest contribution in illuminating organisational commitment by capturing and describing employees' decisions to remain in or leave a particular organisation.

The question may be asked: what is the state of matters regarding organisational commitment and its dimensions and underlying factors in scholarly literature?

Over the years, scholars have defined commitment and measured it in many different ways. The lack of consensus of what the concept entails has contributed greatly to its treatment as a multidimensional construct (Meyer & Allen, 1991). Even if multiple dimensions or forms of commitment exist, there has to be a core essence that characterises it. To establish what that core essence is, one has to look for commonalities among the existing conceptualisations. Table 1 provides a set of definitions taken from the relevant literature. As indicated by Meyer and Herscovitch (2001), all of these refer to a "force" that directs a person's behaviour. There appears to be consensus that this force is experienced as a mindset (ie a frame of mind or psychological state).

Scholars agree, but also differ, in several ways on what organisational commitment entails. All definitions generally point to commitment to –

- (i) being a stabilising and obliging force; and
- (ii) providing direction to behaviour (eg restricting freedom, binding the person to a course of action).

The differences in scholars' definitions involve detail concerning the nature or origin of the stabilising force directing behaviour (Meyer & Herscovitch, 2001).

TABLE 1
GENERAL DEFINITION OF COMMITMENT, MEYER AND HERSOVITCH (2001)

Commitment
"...a state of being in which an individual becomes bound by his actions and through these actions to belief that sustains the activities of his own involvement." (Salancik, 1977: 62)
"...a force that stabilizes individual behaviour under circumstances where the individual would otherwise be tempted to change that behaviour." (Brickman, 1987: 2)
"...a stabilizing force that acts to maintain behavioral direction when expectancy/equity conditions are not met and do not function." (Scholl, 1981: 593)
"Commitment comes into being when a person, by making a side bet, links extraneous interests with a consistent line of activities." (Becker, 1960: 32)
an obligation force which requires that the person to honour the commitment, even in the face of fluctuating attitudes and whims." (Brown, 1996: 241)
"...one's inclination to act in a given way towards a particular commitment target." (Oliver, 1990: 30)
"Commitment is defined as a cognitive predisposition towards a particular focus, insofar as this focus has the potential to satisfy needs, realize values and achieve goals" (Roodt, 2004:85)
Organisational commitment
"...the psychological attachment felt by the person for the organization; it will reflect the degree to which the individual internalizes or adopts characteristics or perceptive of the organization." (O'Reilly & Chatman, 1986:493)
"...the totality of normative pressure to act in a way which meets organisational goals and interests." (Wiener, 1982:421)
"...a psychological state that binds the individual to the organization..." (Allen & Meyer, 1990:14)
"...a bond or linking of the individual to the organization," (Mathieu & Zajac, 1990:171)

Researchers providing a **general definition of commitment** (Table 1) note that commitment is different from motivation or general attitudes (Brickman, 1987; Brown, 1996; Scholl, 1981). They suggest that the concept influences behaviour independently of other motives or attitudes, and might lead to course persistence even when conflicting motives or attitudes exist. Thus commitment may lead individuals to behave in a way that, from the perspective of neutral observers, might seem in contrast with their own self-interest, eg a temporary employee who is productive despite having no job security. (Meyer & Herscovitch, 2001).

Roodt (2004) argues that employee commitment evolved as a wide range of types (eg engagement, attachment, commitment, involvement) within a wide spectrum of foci (eg work, job, career, profession or occupation, organisation, union), while categories towards studying commitment varied between behavioural, attitudinal and motivational within three broad research streams (sociological, industrial/organisational psychology and health psychology).

For the purpose of this study, the following definition of organisational commitment as provided by Allen and Meyer (1990) was used: Organisational commitment is a psychological state that binds the individual to the organisation.

As is evident from their work, scholars tend to disagree about the dimensions of **organisational** commitment. Table 2 presents definitions of the various forms of commitment provided in several multidimensional models of organisation commitment. Differences between multidimensional frameworks stem largely from the different motives and strategies involved in their development. As is to be expected the many different

frameworks pose a problem for the development of a general model of workplace commitment since they make it difficult to answer simple questions such as: "In fact, what is commitment?" Roodt (2004) said it best when he remarked that "most researchers took little cognisance of contradictory research findings and/or of different theorisation about various concepts of employee commitment".

TABLE 2
DIMENSIONS OF ORGANISATIONAL COMMITMENT. O'REILLY & CHATMAN'S MODEL (1986)

Angle and Perry (1981)	Value commitment "Commitment to stay"	Commitment to support the goals of the organisation. Commitment to retain their organisational membership.
O'Reilly and Chatman (1986)	Compliance Identification Internalisation	Instrumental involvement for specific extrinsic rewards. Attachment based on a desire for affiliation with the organisation Involvement predicted on congruence between individuals and organisational values.
Penley and Gould (1988)	Morale Calculative Alternative	Acceptance of and identification with organisational goals. A commitment to an organisation which is based on the employee's receiving inducement to match contribution. Organisational commitment which results when an employee no longer perceives that there are rewards commensurate with investment; yet he/she remains due to lack of available alternatives.
Meyer and Allen (1991)	Affective Continuance Normative	The employee's emotional attachment to, identification with, and involvement in the organisation. An awareness of the costs associated with leaving the organisation A feeling of obligation to continue employment.
Mayer and Schoorman (1992)	Value Continuance	A belief in and acceptance of organisational goals and values and a willingness to exert considerable effort on behalf of the organisation. A feeling of obligation to continue employment.
Jaros et al (1993)	Affective Continuance Morale	The degree to which an individual is psychologically attracted to an organisation through feelings such as loyalty, affection, warmth, belongingness, pleasure, etc. The degree to which an individual experiences a sense of being locked in place because of the high cost of leaving. The degree to which an individual is psychologically attached to an organisation through internalisation of its goals, values and mission.

This table gives the overall view, and since it is not the purpose of this study to examine organisational commitment, only those models that have generated most research and which best explain commitment in terms of organisational behaviour, will be discussed (Meyer & Allen; 1991, O'Reilly & Chatman, 1986).

O'Reilly and Chatman's (1986) model

O'Reilly and Chatman (1986), as discussed in Meyer and Herscovitch (2001), developed a multidimensional framework based on the assumption that commitment represents an attitude towards the organisation, and that there are various mechanisms through which attitude can develop. Based on Kelman's (1958) work on attitude and behaviour change, O'Reilly and Chatman argued that commitment takes the following three forms:

- **Compliance.** This occurs when attitudes and corresponding behaviour are adopted in order to gain specific rewards

- **Identification.** This occurs when an individual accepts influence to establish or maintain a satisfying relationship.
- **Internalisation.** This occurs when influence is accepted because the attitude and behaviours one is being encouraged to adopt are congruent with existing values.

The employee's psychological attachment can reflect various combinations of these three psychological foundations.

TABLE 3

THE THREE-COMPONENT MODEL OF COMMITMENT, MEYER & ALLEN (1997)

AFFECTIVE (AFFECTIVE ORIENTATION)

"An attitude or an orientation toward the organisation which links or attaches the identity of the person to the organisation." (Sheldon, 1971:143)

"A partisan, affective attachment to the goals and values of the organisation, to one's role in relation to goals and values, and to the organisation for its own sake, apart from its purely instrumental worth." (Buchanan, 1974:533)

"The process by which the goals of the organisation and those of the individual become increasingly integrated or congruent." (Hall et al, 1970: 176-177)

"The relative strength of an individual's identification with and involvement in a particular organisation." (Mowday et al, 1982:27)

"The attachment of an individual's fund of affectivity and emotion to the group" Kanter, 1968:507

CONTINUANCE (COST BASED)

"Commitment comes into being when a person, by making a side bet, links extraneous interests with a consistent line of activity." (Becker, 1960: 32)

"Profit associated with continued participation and a 'cost' associated with leaving" (Kanter, 1968: 504)

"A structural phenomenon, which occurs as a result of individual/organisational transactions and alteration in side bets or investment over time." (Hrebiniak & Alutto, 1972:556)

NORMATIVE (OBLIGATION OR MORAL)

"Commitment behaviours are socially accepted behaviours that exceed formal and/or normative expectations relevant to the object of commitment." (Wiener & Gechman, 1977:48)

"The totality of internalized normative pressure to act in a way which meets organisational goals and interests." (Wiener, 1982:421)

"The commitment employees consider morally right to stay in the company, regardless of how much status enhancement or satisfaction the firm gives him or her over the years." (Marsh & Mannari, 1977:59)

Meyer & Allen, (1997) reflects the three broad themes as indicated by category labels, used to develop their three-component model of commitment. Meyer and Allen (1991:67) noted that organisational commitment is "the view that commitment is a psychological state, which (1) characterises the relationship with the organisation, and (2) has implication for the decision to continue membership with the organisation." They describe these three components as affective, continuance and normative.

The focus of organisational commitment

Roodt (2004) points out that poor theoretical integration and poor theory building unfortunately still permeates each research stream (sociology, Industrial & Organisational psychology, health) and approach to commitment (attitudinal, behavioural, motivational). According to him, few attempts have been made to eliminate construct redundancy and construct contamination across different research streams and approaches. This has contributed largely to the development of a wide range of different commitment foci.

It therefore can be argued that a clear understanding of organisational commitment as a concept is virtually imperative in the organisation. This will help management to understand what the real issues in the organisation are, which areas needs attention, and what can be done to address the identified gaps.

Behavioural focus on organisational commitment

Individuals' behaviours and attitudes are affected by organisational factors in terms of the psychological contract. The importance of these in affecting attitudes or behaviours of employees has been widely advocated (Allen & Meyer, 1990; Cohen, 1993; Mathieu & Zajac, 1990; Meyer & Allen, 1984; O'Reilly & Chatman, 1986). According to Chang (1999) after entering the company, members evaluate whether the company has fulfilled the psychological and employment contract. The psychological contract is a perceptual belief about what employees believe they are entitled to receive or should receive (Robinson, 1996). Robinson, Kraunt & Rossouw (1994) suggest that when employees feel that their employers have failed to fulfil their obligations, they tend to reduce their obligation by showing withdrawal behaviour, eg decreased level of commitment and high turnover rate.

Entity focus on organisational commitment

Meyer and Herscovitch (2001) suggest that differences in focus are largely a function of emphasis. When commitment is considered to focus on an entity, the behavioural consequences are often implied, if not stated explicitly. These authors also suggest, however, that from the standpoint of understanding and predicting outcomes of commitment, there may be an advantage in specifying the relevant entity and behaviour.

According to Meyer and Allen (1997) when commitment is measured as a whole, it is probably measuring employee's commitment to "top management" (Reichers, 1986) or a combination of top management and more localised foci (Becker & Billings, 1992). Meyer and Allen (1997:20) suggest when using "commitment as a means of understanding or predicting behaviour of violence to the organisation as a whole (to top management specifically), it would seem that the purpose can be well served with global measures of organisational commitment". If interested in behaviour to more specific constituencies (eg the supervisor), it would be better to measure commitment to the relevant constituency.

Meyer and Herscovitch (2001) suggest that individuals may commit to both entities and behaviours. Meyer and colleagues (Meyer & Allen, 1984, 1991, Meyer, Allen & Smith, 1993) define commitment in such a way that it implies a course of action (continuing membership) of relevance to an entity (organisation or profession).

Commitment and work behaviour

Organisations need employees who are willing to go beyond the call of duty and engage in extra-role behaviours. For this reason, researchers continued to examine the link between the three components of commitment and they have developed a multidimensional measure of work behaviour. Allen and Smith (1987) and Meyer and Allen (1984) found that measures of work behaviour correlated positively with measures of affective and normative commitment, but not with continuance commitment. Research by Randall, Fedor and Longenecker (1990) revealed that affective commitment contributed significantly to the prediction of concern for quality, sacrifice orientation and willingness to share knowledge. Normative commitment contributed only to the prediction of sacrifice orientation, and continuance commitment did not add significantly to the prediction of any of these behaviours. These findings thus provide support for the supposition that the three components of commitment have different implications for work-related behaviour other than turnover.

The relevance of organisational commitment

Organisational commitment was originally intended as a tool to manage human resources within a hierarchical organisational structure. Such organisations are now decreasing in number, with the unit of activities becoming smaller. However, owing to its

potential for increasing productivity, whatever its form, strategies to encourage commitment will continue to be important in managing human resources in the future (Sano, 1999). Managers therefore increasingly rely less on formal rules and more on building a committed workforce to attain organisational objectives (Carson, Carson P, Birkenmeier, & Phillip, 1999)

Organisational commitment and retention factors

Employee retention, productivity, quality and corporate financial success are characterised as high- performance and high-commitment strategies. The assumption is that integrated sets of management strategies focusing on commitment (as opposed to control) produce high levels of affective employee commitment and subsequent organisational performance (Tsui et al; 1995).

There are a number of factors that can influence employees' commitment to the organisation or factors that can have a bearing on the organisation's ability to preserve certain skills and talents in the workplace. For the purpose of this study the factors below were identified.

Compensation

According to Higginbotham (1997) high salaries are not essential for retaining employees, but "good" and "fair" salaries showed a strong correlation with intention to stay, indicating that as long as the compensation was competitive, financial rewards were not the primary factor in retention. Kochanski and Ledford (2001) support this statement, which indicates that the actual level of pay is less important than feelings about pay raises and the process used to administer them. Employees want to understand how the pay system works, and want to know how they can earn pay increases. Once the pay level has been reached other things become important, eg, the intangibles, such as career, supervisor support, work and family balance (Tomlinson, 2002).

Benefit packages

Managers can pick and choose from a variety of programmes, such as flexible spending accounts, flexitime, in-house training and tuition-refund programmes to meet their corporate goals and satisfy their diverse employee populations. (Kochanski & Ledford, 2001).

Morale and motivation

According to Kreitener and Kinicki (2001) the term "motivation" derives from the Latin word movere, meaning "to move". In the present context, the term represents "those psychological processes that cause the arousal, direction and persistence of voluntary actions that are goal directed". Managers need to understand these psychological processes if they wish to successfully guide employees towards accomplishing organisational objectives. Figure 1 integrates elements from several motivation theories.

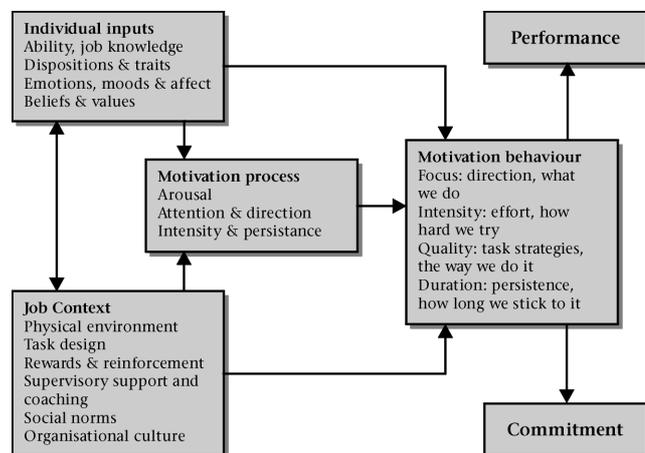


Figure 1: Integrated elements of motivational theories. Kreitener & Kinicki (2001)

Diagram 1 shows that individual inputs and job context are two key elements of factors that influence motivation. Employees bring ability, job knowledge, dispositions and traits, emotions, moods, beliefs and values to the work setting. The job context includes the physical environment, the tasks one completes, the organisation's approach to recognition and rewards, the adequacy of supervisory support and coaching and the organisation's culture. These two categories of factors influence each other, as well as the motivational process of arousal, direction and persistence, which in turn influence performance and commitment in the workplace (Kreitener & Kinicki, 2001).

Career growth and development

Despite the shift in ultimate responsibility and ownership, the value of investing in the comprehensive career-development process is still widely recognised and informed by needs such as attracting and retaining high-performing employees and the need to instill a mindset of continuous learning and improving employee satisfaction with opportunities for career growth (Garavan, Morley, Gunnigle and Collins, 2001; Mason, Chua, Roux and Kaye, 1999) cited in Meyer (2002). Kaye (1999) states that for such companies career development is not a programme, but a process that integrates and supports ongoing activities and thereby maximising the value of on-the-job experiences with training and development.

Leadership

In terms of management support and organisational commitment, Eby, Adams, Russel & Gaby (2000) indicated that work environment was characterised by participation in important work-related decisions, supervisory feedback and support and rewards that were perceived as fair and equitable. This provides individuals with the opportunity to make a difference to the job and to try out new skills, exercise discretion and receive feedback on their performance. These work conditions, instigated by management, are expected to increase individuals' intrinsic motivation by providing affirmation that their efforts are worthwhile and valued (Thomas & Velthouse, 1990). The proposed outcome of this mastery-based motivation is affective commitment to the organisation and general job satisfaction. In turn, these affective work reactions are expected to impact on areas such as turnover and absenteeism.

Nature of the job itself

Employees need a reasonable degree of autonomy in their application of knowledge. Even if employees rarely decide on the organisational policy to which their expertise contributes, they still need a reasonable degree of autonomy in the process of performing their work (Bailyn & Lynch, 1983). When job autonomy is high, workers will view their work outcomes in terms of their own efforts, initiatives and decisions, rather than instructions of the supervisor or procedure (Marx, 1996).

Training and development

Training is essential for the livelihood of any employee, and is the only way employment can be maintained over their careers. Tomlinson (2002) suggests that it is critical that organisations keep the leading edge by having their employees well trained in the latest systems and technologies. Employees remain with companies that promote career opportunities through learning and the ability to apply their newly-learned skills (Cataldo, Van Assen & D'Alessandro, 2000; Jiang & Klein, 2000).

Employee training is intended to provide opportunities for advancement and might be perceived as "the organisation values them and bolster their sense of self-worth, therefore building a stronger affective commitment" (Meyer & Allen, 1997). Training, if put to use on the job, should increase affective organisational commitment through its link to increase job scope. This

response can be a function of closer psychological attachment to the organisation and its goals (McElroy, 2001). Paré, Tremblay & Lalonde (2001:24) found training to be positively related to affective commitment.

Performance management

The shift from traditional single-rater performance appraisal to 360-degree or multirater feedback system as a modern approach to performance management has been a significant trend in the area of performance management. Multirater feedback is used when a person receives performance ratings from a range of parties, such as supervisors, peers and subordinates and, in some cases, even customers, using some type of standardised instrument which is computerised in many companies. Clear procedures and understanding of systems in the organisation can motivate employees and uplift the level of commitment. This can be attained through effective utilisation of the performance management system, which provide management with the opportunity to understand employees' weakness and identify individual development programmes, relevant to curb the identified gaps.

Work environment

According to Rollinson, Broadfield and Edwards (1998) organisational commitment can be influenced by a number of factors that may be major or minor.

They identified Resources, Physical conditions, (location where the offices are based) safety and security of employees in the workplace as factors that can affect employees' level of commitment.

Moorhead and Griffin (1995) also added supportive relationships as another important factor. They suggest that in all organisational activities, individuals should be treated in such a way that they experience feelings of support, self-worth and importance. These involve the elements of respect, courtesy and empathy amongst employees and management and among employees themselves.

It can therefore be argued that management needs to consider the above mentioned factors when compiling, amongst other things, the operational plans, business plans, as well as the strategic plans, because of the impact this factors might have on the employees' commitment level, as well as the processes taking place in the organisation.

RESEARCH DESIGN

Research approach

In view of the aim and objectives of the study (detecting and describing views of employees on organisational commitment) and other previous statements, the author opted for a qualitative research methodology.

This approach implies: "...observing people in their everyday lives, listening to them talk about what is on their minds, and looking at the documents they produce". Via this approach: "...qualitative researchers are able to obtain firsthand knowledge of the social life unfiltered through operational definitions or rating scales" (Taylor & Bogdan, 1984:33). Using unstructured and flexible methods, a researcher is able to obtain the insider's perspective and definition of the situation in a holistic and rich manner. The flexibility of qualitative research is perhaps its most important value since it can be modified relatively easily as the study progresses, making it particularly suitable for studying real-life situations (Punch, 1998).

In the light of the many traditions of contemporary qualitative research, it has become necessary to point out the particular variety one has chosen (Schurink, 2004).

Research Methodology

Modernist qualitative research

For the purposes of this study the author opted for a modernist variety of qualitative research. Extending through the post-war years, the 1970s, the mid-1980s, to the work of many contemporary qualitative scholars, this tradition has, according to Denzin and Lincoln (2003), generated highly influential "formalised" methods. Schurink (2004) emphasises that this qualitative tradition is characterised by the interpretation of social reality by means of formalised methods of data collection and rigorous tools of data analysis (e.g. analytical induction and grounded theory). Apart from the fact that this approach generates sufficient information that explains the process taken when gathering data and how it was analysed, it also provides a comfortable and conducive free-flowing interaction (between the researcher and the participants) that enhance the reliability of the results.

Casing as research design

In the light of the many changes that have taken place in qualitative research it should come as no surprise that researchers can choose from various designs (Schurink, 2004). The case study as a well-known design was chosen.

Suffice it to say that the study comprised multiple case studies within the context of a more defined exploratory approach. A sample size of 14 employees was chosen, and that was done with ethical consideration. Furthermore, the researcher approached employees (represented at all levels within the organisation. i.e. top management, middle management, consultants, specialists and practitioners) to share their stories and experiences. Informed by the belief that both inductive (focusing on identifying patterns and meaning derived from a particular social reality or phenomenon) and deductive approaches (utilising theoretical concepts and ideas derived from abstract work of scholars available in the literature) are required, both tactics were applied in this research. That was also done to ensure that the reliability and validity of the study is not threatened.

Operationalisation

While attending to the preceding perspectives in the study's qualitative component, the researcher did not ignore general evaluative principles. It seemed particularly helpful to consider the fit between the study's respective components. Punch (1994) identifies the following main areas, all of which were considered in this approach:

- The "set-up" of the research
- The empirical procedures used in the study (design, data collection, sample and data analysis)
- The data quality
- The findings and conclusions presented in the research report
- The presentation and display of the research

As planned, a number of strategies were used throughout the study, including compiling autoethnographical notes, to curb possible bias. It is also important to note that the researcher reflected on the progression of decisions made during the execution of the study and illuminated this for the readers. That is in line with what Punch (1994) refers to as critical subjectivity meaning: "...that we do not suppress our primary subjective experience, that we accept that our knowing is from a perspective; it also means that we are aware of that perspective and of its bias, and we articulate it in our comments. Critical subjectivity involves a self-reflexive attention to the ground on which one is standing". Variables included in this study were selected based on the empirical support in the relevant literature, theoretical relevance and anticipated contribution of the study to the industry that was identified.

Data display

While qualitative researchers sometimes use tables to summarise their findings, they generally provide in-depth description or quotations of how social life is accomplished.

They typically provide clear examples from the voluminous amount of data representing the way in which subjects have organised their worlds, their thoughts about what is happening and their experiences, as well as their perceptions. This, of course, is no easy task because: "...firstly, examples from the data that typify certain observed patterns should be provided in order to enable the reader to see what they look like" (Schurink, 2004).

Research participants

The researcher was very careful when selecting research participants, ensuring that all races (Indians, coloureds, whites and blacks), literacy level, and other ethical issues (language, traditions, cultures, and religions) are considered. The researcher also gathered a harmless and brief historical background of each participant. According to Schurink, that is very important in helping the researcher to better understand the participants. It also gives readers of the article the opportunity to understand the people who took part in the study without having met them.

To allow participants to express themselves to the maximum level that was considered to be satisfactory, participants were allowed to use the language they felt comfortable with. Most of the participants preferred to use English, but there were a few instances where they preferred to use their mother tongue and I captured that in my analysis.

Methods of collecting data

Unstructured interviews were conducted as a data-gathering method. Information was then recorded on tape, and in some cases I took notes during the sessions. Four sessions per participant were conducted over a period of 3 to 4 months. The first two sessions were basically used to extract information from the participants. The third session came as a follow-up meeting aimed at clarifying all the unclear aspects and issues raised during the first two sessions so as to create a concrete understanding of the situation.

During the third-round meetings in order to enhance validity, I offered parts from transcripts, together with field-notes, which contained a summarisation and interpretation of the material during the unstructured interviews, to the interviewees to ensure accuracy and to facilitate further comments which I might have missed. Getting both the researcher and interviewees to collaborate on the writing up of interviews is a good way to enhance validity since it allows a more objective assessment (Humphrey & Lee, 2004) cited in Schurink 2004. The fourth session was mainly about validating the information with respondents and obtaining their views about the data that was gathered.

Analysis of data

The following strategies were employed, as suggested by Schurink (2004), to demonstrate the level of biasness and inappropriate subjectivity:

- Reflexivity
- The audit trail
- Peer debriefing

As Schurink (2004) points out, **reflexivity** entails the process during which one critically reflects on one's own role and preconceptions throughout the research process; the data-collection, analysis, interpretation and report-writing stages. The **audit trail**: "Credibility" or "natural history" is closely related to reflexivity. Athens (1984:265) writes the following about scientific credibility:

"Scientific credibility is not an ascribed quality of a study, but rather an achieved one. Thus, a study is neither intrinsically credible nor incredible, rather, the researcher must make it so. The way in which a researcher makes a study credible is by supplying an adequate account of his or her research along

with the description of its results. An account is merely a story told by the researcher about how he or she performed the research in question".

The **audit trail** represents the thorough documentation of the decisions the researcher made before and after the research and an account of his or her research process, (Schurink, 2004).

Peer debriefing

Here one identifies a few colleagues who intermittently review one's work by re-analysing the raw data and by discussing one's interpretation of them with one. ("ditto").

Throughout the various phases of this study several debriefing sessions were held, to –

- detect bias or inappropriate subjectivity;
- obtain alternative explanations to my own explanations; and
- obtain warnings against inappropriate attempts to produce interpretations not substantiated by the data.

FINDINGS

The following (Compensation, benefit packages, moral, motivation, career growth, leadership style, nature of job, Training and development, performance management system and the work environment) were identified as factors affecting the commitment of employees in the workplace.

Compensation: Reward systems are frequently used by companies in an effort to retain staff (Farris, 2000). In this study a significant number of research participants indicated that monetary rewards were contributing a lot towards employees' decisions to stay in or leave the organisation. They mentioned that they were sometimes motivated to go the extra mile if they knew that they would be financially rewarded.

One employee used a famous township expression *Faka imali uzobona* (put in some money and you will see the results) to emphasise the role of money in our lives. *Tshelete e tla nna ele "issue" mo maphelong a rona "because the cost of leaving is crazily high, it's ridiculous I'm telling you"* (money will forever remain an issue in our lives because of the extremely high cost of leaving).

Another employee sharing the same sentiment made it clear that he was not necessarily making decisions based on money, but could not deny its importance. His decisions revolved around what the company did for him, and especially how they rewarded him. *Eqinisweni wonke umuntu uyafisa ukuthi akwazi ukuhlinzekela izidingo zempilo, noma angehlukile kwabanye abantu. Lento ayinako nkwenza nemali.* (It is not all about money, but honestly speaking, everybody wants or wishes to be able to afford better things in life, and I'm not an exception to this).

Lower morale: The term morale (Mastekaasa, 2004) represents "...those psychological processes that cause the arousal, direction and persistence of voluntary actions that are goal directed". Managers need to understand these psychological processes if they wish to successfully guide employees towards accomplishing organisational objectives. There are, of course, a number of issues involved when talking about morale and motivation. People become motivated and demoralised by different things and to a different extent.

One of the employees taking part in the present study expressed it in this way: "People are not happy here; we are not happy. The majority of us are demoralised by issues ranging from poor treatment from the top to career frustrations, and as a result we don't have any reason to push ourselves beyond the expectations". *Re tlabre re kahlisa mang?* Meaning: Who will we be trying to impress?

Career growth

Career growth also came out strongly, indicating that people were concerned about their own future; they wanted to progress and they became frustrated when they believed that their path was blocked, or that there were some obstacles in their way.

One concerned and worried woman put it like this: "I have compromised so much and sacrificed a lot for this organisation, but all I get in return is a disgusting 'we don't care attitude' from my boss. I cannot be stacked in one position forever. I also need to be given an opportunity to grow as well. I'm not saying I want to be the CEO, but I think I have overstayed my welcome in this position and cannot take it any longer".

Leadership

The fourth factor that came out strongly on the list was the role played by those in leadership positions.

One of the employees who complained about leadership spoke about the "distance between employees and their leaders", suggesting that there was a rift between them, and as a result they (the leaders) were not accessible and accountable. He acknowledged that, of course, people had to follow protocol in terms of submitting their concerns and at the same time had to remember that managers also had things to attend to, and therefore could not be available at all times since they were responsible for the overall running of the organisation, but he still insisted that the leaders needed to make time for people on the ground.

Quite a few people also complained about being led by incompetent leaders, eg leaders with questionable leadership styles, people who took decisions without consultation and people who delegated, even where it was not appropriate, and who failed to guide employees where they most needed their assistance. One employee said: *Rona re bona mathata fela mo mosebetsing, di "leaders" tsa rona ga di tsebe ntwe di e etsang, ba tswere bothata "and that thing" e sokodisa rona.* (We are really experiencing problems here at work, our leaders don't know what they are doing, they are struggling. As a result we are the ones who are suffering).

Nature of work

Research has shown that employees engage in higher levels of citizenship behaviour when they have the opportunity to work on intrinsically satisfying tasks. However, citizenship levels (commitment) are likely to be noticeably lower when employees are given repetitive or routine tasks to complete. In addition, bureaucratic rules and procedures that overly constrain workers may serve to inhibit acts of citizenship (Bolino & Turnley, 2003).

Unchallenging tasks were also highlighted as serious concerns for most employees in the workplace. An employee mentioned that she had been doing the same thing for over 3 years, and that there was nothing new about it. The task was routine and she believed that this would hamper her psychological growth.

On the other hand, another employee complained about the complicated tasks that she was required to master. Stating that some systems were very complex and took time before one could grasp them, and as a result she easily became frustrated and lost interest.

Training and development

According to Raghunathan, Raghunathan & TU (1998) the difficulty of the retention of qualified personnel cannot be understated, and a particular problem in the retention systems is attributed to the "higher growth needs" for skilled personnel. (Cougar & Zawacki, 1980).

Training and development also cropped up as concerns to some research participants. One employee suggested that training

needed to be analysed before people should be sent on training courses. She mentioned that sometimes people received irrelevant training and missed out on important ones because team leaders made those decisions without consulting or identifying the individual's needs.

Performance reviews

The item mentioned least, but emphasised most strongly by the research participants was performance reviews. Few participants raised any concerns about the manner in which performance reviews were still handled. Firstly, there was the issue of how some managers still struggled with understanding the purpose of reviews, and were using them for all the wrong reasons such as for punishing individuals they had targeted.

One employee mentioned that his manager made it clear from day one that no one would ever get a mark of 4 (5 point performance rating scale, 5 = excellent, 1 = poor performance), because he himself had never received that mark from his boss.

In addition, performance reviews were most of the time not completed in time, and when the due date arrived managers put pressure on employees. They were using the "let's do it and get it over" approach, which was ethically wrong.

Positive Themes

These are factors which employees viewed as positive and encouraging, factors that give them a reason to stay with the organisation, as opposed to those that makes them leave.

Work environment

The majority of participants, that is, almost everyone who took part in this study, acknowledged the fact that the environment, which included the people, the building and the resources used, was next to perfect. One employee said that he felt part of the family at this retail and clothing company, and that was so because they always treated each other with respect and love. Most of the participants agreed that their workplace was a safe environment and their machinery and systems were advanced and always kept up to date, making it a wonderful place to be at, regardless of all the negative aspects.

One male participant mentioned that when he resigned, he couldn't handle the pain of leaving behind such a bunch of good people and as a result he cried (literally) during his farewell party. *Ngiyengakhubazek' umoya, inhliziyo yami yephuka, kube ingathi inxenywe yempilo yami imuke nomfula. Ngakuthokozela kakhulu ukusebenza nalabantu.* (It was painful, my heart was aching. I felt like an integral part of my life had been shut down. I really enjoyed working with those guys.)

Benefit structure

Although most people complained about the remuneration packages, they acknowledged that the company's benefit structure was attractive. By introducing the I-share Yethu Scheme, which offered free shares to all employees, management motivated employees to a great extent.

World-class service

A number of employees also said that although they experienced some problems in the workplace, most of the time they managed to comply with the mission and vision of the company and, as far as possible, provided excellent service and quality products to their customers. Most of the participants mentioned that thanks to their readiness and commitment to serve their customers, their company was collecting awards one after the other; out-classing their competitors.

Exposure

Having been voted "the best company to work for" and being regarded the leader in the retail and clothing industry, most employees felt that they were getting the necessary exposure and experience in their respective fields. Gurus from Europe and

America have been recruited in the past few years to bring their knowledge and expertise into the company, and most participants believed that this was helping them a lot as they could mingle with experts.

DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The purpose of this study was to detect and describe factors (as viewed by employees) that influence organisational commitment in one of the retail and clothing organisation. The findings (based on the literature and the information gathered) indicate that organisational commitment plays an important role towards the intended strategic objectives of the organisation.

It, however, has to be acknowledged that organisational commitment is a complicated concept and the study of it, a tedious one. Over the years researchers have been struggling with and disagreeing about what commitment entailed and how it could be measured. Roodt (2004) indicated that a number of researchers (Knoop, 1986; Morrow, 1983; Morrow & McElroy, 1986; O'Reilly & Chatman, 1986; Rabinowitz & Hall, 1977) cited in Meyer and Allen (1991) have pointed out that research in the wider arena of employee commitment has not evolved in a logical, coherent and progressive fashion. This resulted in concept redundancy and concept contamination.

The findings of the study also suggest that the link between commitment and other factors is conspicuous and indisputable, making it almost impossible to study the concept independently.

Remuneration appears to be a serious issue in the organisation in question. The majority of employees were not satisfied with what they were paid and believed that, that affected their level of commitment severely. The alarming number of complains around the issues does not mean management should just increase salaries without reviewing the policy on remuneration. There are other factors that might have an impact on the issues, such as individual's financial management skills, proper life style planning and the cost of living. To address this issue management should review the policy on remuneration and also arrange life skills workshops for employees, to assist them with planning.

The level of morale in the organisation is also important as it determines the extent to which employees are ready to go, in terms of committing themselves to the set objectives of the organisation. Management needs to diagnose the situation by means of using organisational development tools (e.g. climate survey) to understand the root-cause of the lower level of morale experienced in the organisation. A solution to this problem is critical because of the impact it might have on the overall productivity. Also, workshops on motivation can be arranged to assist employees to believe in themselves, be innovative and participate in the activities taking place in their workplace.

Employees also indicated that their career development is a matter of serious concern. This ties in nicely with what Mason, Chua, Roux and Kaye, 1999; Garavan, Morley, Gunnigle and Collins, 2001) cited in Meyer & Allen (2001) found, namely: that despite the shift in ultimate responsibility and ownership, the value of investing in a comprehensive career-development process is still widely recognised and informed by needs such as attracting and retaining high-performing employees, the need to instil a mindset of continuous learning, and to improve employee satisfaction with opportunities for career growth. Garavan et al. (2001) and Mason et al. (1999) cited in Meyer & Herscovitch (2001). Through performance management system, relevant training and career path should be identified, and be made available and accessible to employees, to ensure personal and ultimately, organisational growth.

The issue of leadership in the organisation is also a concern. Employees prefer to be led by people with profound knowledge and skills in the organisation. They complained about people with questionable leadership styles, people who targeted them during reviews instead of building them up. They preferred to be consulted when decisions were taken, especially those that affected them. This supports (Amabile, 1993, Conger and Kanungo 1988 & Spreitzer, 1996 cited in Ramus & Steger 2000), whose findings recognised the role of managerial support in employee empowerment, referring to it as "the motivational concept of employees' feelings (self-efficacy) that can influence their work performance".

Management needs to look into this issue with resolute interest because of the influence leaders have in the organisation and the value attached to their roles. Change management interventions focusing on interpersonal relations and relationship building needs to be considered to address this issue. Leadership development workshops can also be used to equip leaders with necessary skills, tactics, and knowledge necessary to achieve the organisational goals. Without proper leadership, the organisations is unlikely to reach the desired stage, mainly because when the level of commitment drops no one will be there to drive the organisation into the right direction.

Quite a number of employees also mentioned the fact that the nature of their jobs also affected their commitment. Challenging jobs that were not complicated were preferred by most as opposed to dull and routine jobs. Management needs to (depending on the departmental policies) introduce a rotation system to deal with the problem of boredom. If rotating employees is not an option, then job functions can be redesigned, enriched or upgraded.

Employee training was also believed to provide an opportunity for advancement and might boost their sense of self-worth, thereby building a stronger affective commitment. Employees mentioned the fact that they needed relevant training to sharpen their skills and boost their confidence. The findings by Agarwal & Ferratt (1999) and Tsui et al (1995) supported this, and particularly their point that "the primary mechanism by which training is predicted to increase organisational commitment is through increased self-worth and importance". p.311. management should also look into training needs analysis (TNA) to ensure that the right person receives the right training.

Performance reviews should be used with the aim of achieving its main purpose. It should be used to assist managers to close the gaps and identify areas that still need development. To ensure that employees and their managers fully understand the system, management needs to provide them with training and supporting documents around performance management and development system.

On the positive side, most participating employees believed that, to a certain extent, they were doing their best to help the organisation achieve its set goals. They felt at home at this organisation, and attributed that to the welcoming environment (which includes the psychical side: the perceived safe area and decent building). Most believed that they were treating each other with courtesy and respect (the human side) because they understood and cared for each other.

Some attributed that to regular unit team-building sessions that normally takes place within the organisation. Management should ensure that the practice continue, as it yields prolific results necessary to enhance organisational commitment.

The study afforded employees the platform to vent their concerns and share their frustrations. It is therefore recommended that

management use the findings and recommendations of this study to curb the gaps within the organisation.

Given the nature of the labour market today, where change is constant and the complexity surrounding commitment, further research of a similar kind is clearly required to further demystify issues that were not covered, clearly explained or explored to a satisfactory level, in the study described here.

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