



## The relationship between career growth and organizational commitment

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### ABSTRACT

This research examines the relationship between employees' career growth and organizational commitment. Career growth was conceptualized by four factors: career goal progress, professional ability development, promotion speed and remuneration growth, while organizational commitment was conceptualized using Meyer and Allen's (1997) three component model. Survey data, collected from 961 employees in 10 cities in the People's Republic of China, showed that the four dimensions of career growth were positively related to affective commitment, and that three of the facets were positively related to continuance and normative commitment. Only three of eighteen two-way interactions among the career growth factors affected organizational commitment, suggesting that the career growth factors influence commitment in an additive rather than a multiplicative manner. Results focus on how career growth can be used to manage organizational commitment.

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### Introduction

The new economy has changed the way organizations are structured and managed (Arthur, Inkson, & Pringle, 1999). It has also modified employee–organization relationships (Coyle-Shapiro, Shore, Taylor, & Tetrick, 2004) and raised questions about how career development activities now fit into the exchange relations between employees and organizations. Gone are the days when one's career was tied to a single organization, as career change and job mobility have become common phenomena (Rousseau, 1998). These changes have influenced both individuals and organizations. Research has shown that career growth is one of the most important factors cited by students in their job choice decision (Hu, Weng, & Yang, 2008). Today, however, individuals seeking to gain personal career growth can do so across different organizations, if such opportunities are lacking within their current employer, making organizational commitment less salient to these individuals. Loss of such talent, on the other hand, is detrimental to organizations, so organizations strive to prevent such talent loss by developing a committed workforce. The purpose of this paper is to investigate the relationship between individuals' career growth and the organization's desire for a committed workforce.

Bits and pieces of research suggest that career growth has a bearing on organizational commitment. Alvi and Ahmed (1987), in a study of 2000 Pakistani employees, found that employees who perceive high promotional opportunities in their organization have higher levels of organizational commitment. Personal development opportunity (Liu & Wang, 2001), promotion equity and training (Long, Fang, & Ling, 2002) and opportunity for learning (Ng, Butts, Vandenberg, DeJoy, & Wilson, 2006) have independently been shown to affect employees' commitment to their organizations. Such research suggests that, in general, the ability of employees to personally grow and develop within their places of employment affects their psychological attachment to employers. Moreover, this research suggests that organizations can influence employee commitment by

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recognizing and rewarding such growth. What is less clear are the specifics associated within this relationship. For example, organizational commitment is a multi-dimensional concept, so the question of which dimensions of commitment are affected by career growth remains. Moreover, career growth can also be viewed as a multi-dimensional construct. Weng and Hu (2009) suggest that career growth consists of meeting career goals, developing one's professional abilities and receiving promotions and compensation commensurate with those abilities. These aspects of career growth may differentially affect organizational commitment.

### **Career growth and organizational commitment**

Much of the research on career growth examines the *process* of growing in one's career, e.g., career self management (Guterman, 1991; Sturges, Guest, Conway, & Davey, 2002; Weng & McElroy, 2009) rather than on the *results* of such efforts. Career growth captures the results of one's efforts by defining it as one's perceptions of the chances of development and advancement within an organization (Jans, 1989). Unfortunately, little attention has been paid to the specific ways in which employees might judge their chances for development and advancement. Weng and Hu (2009) recently proposed that employee career growth could be captured by four factors: career goal progress, professional ability development, promotion speed, and remuneration growth. This multi-dimensional conceptualization implies that career growth is both a function of the employees' own efforts in making progress toward their personal career goals and acquiring new skills *and* the organization's efforts in rewarding such efforts, through promotions and salary increases. This multi-dimensional view of career growth can also be construed as fulfillment of promises on the part of the employer implied by the psychological contract, which in turn has been found to be positively related to employees' organizational commitment (Coyle-Shapiro & Morrow, 2006).

Rousseau (1998) has suggested two specific ways in which organizations can strengthen employee-organizational commitment: (1) organizations can enhance perceptions of the value of organizational membership and (2) demonstrate to employees that they are valued by the organization. It would seem that fostering employee assessments of career growth by assisting employees in meeting career goals, acquiring new skills and then reinforcing these activities by promotions and salary increases would achieve higher levels of organizational commitment.

#### *Career growth and affective commitment*

Affective commitment refers to employees' psychological attachment to their organizations caused by their identification with the objectives and values of their organizations. In other words, employees are loyal to and choose to remain with their organizations because they want to (Meyer, Allen, & Smith, 1993). One reason for wanting to remain with the organization is related to the ability of individuals to satisfy their needs at work (Hackman & Oldham, 1976). As defined here, career growth encapsulates need satisfaction at a number of levels; suggesting that career growth would be positively related to affective organizational commitment. This argument is supported by Meyer et al.'s (1993) contention that affective commitment will be higher for employees whose experiences in their organization satisfy their needs than for those with less satisfying organizational experiences. Meeting career goals and achieving professional ability development exemplify higher order need satisfaction while promotion and remuneration provide measures of how one is viewed by their organization. Organizations that allow employees to experience career growth create a mutual investment type of employee-organizational relationship (Tsui, Pearce, Porter, & Tripoli, 1997). Hom et al. (2009) assert that such a relationship leads to the employee feeling greater compatibility with the organization leading to higher affective organizational commitment. Consequently, individuals who experience career growth by working on tasks that are related to their career goals, and allowing them to learn new things and grow professionally, and who perceive that the organization is willing to reward them for their efforts, will have higher levels of affective commitment. Conversely, employees whose career goals are difficult to achieve, who are assigned tasks that do not allow for growth, and who perceive little connection between their efforts and organizational rewards, will have lower affective commitment. Thus, we propose the following:

**Hypothesis 1.** Career growth is positively associated with affective commitment.

**H1a.** Career goal progress is positively associated with affective commitment.

**H1b.** Professional ability development is positively associated with affective commitment.

**H1c.** Promotion speed is positively associated with affective commitment.

**H1d.** Remuneration growth is positively associated with affective commitment.

#### *Career growth and continuance commitment*

Continuance commitment is a function of the perceived cost of leaving an organization, due to what Becker (1960) refers to as "side bets." In other words, people feel a sense of commitment to their organization because they feel they have to remain (Meyer et al., 1993). To do otherwise would be to forgo favorable levels of personal status, seniority, remuneration, work schedule, pension, and other benefits acquired. Consequently, any factor that increases the perceived costs of resigning can be

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