Understanding the antecedents of organizational commitment in the context of temporary organizations: An empirical study

Thomas Spanuth[a], Andreas Wald[b],*

[a] Horváth & Partner GmbH, Hamburger Allee 2-4, 60486 Frankfurt, Germany
[b] School of Business & Law, University of Agder, Postboks 422, 4604 Kristiansand, Norway

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates how the characteristics of temporary organizations affect an employee's commitment to the temporary organization, and more precisely, whether the respective effect is similar or opposite to that in permanent organizations. We examine job-related and organizational antecedents of organization commitment, and test to what extent their effects differ in the context of temporary organizations using a data set of more than 600 professionals. Further, we find that an employee's work-life conflict has a mediating role on these relationships. Our study contributes to research by simultaneously considering several antecedents and how their effects may differ between permanent and temporary organizations.

1. Introduction

Research in organizational behavior has increasingly been interested in better understanding the theoretical basis, determinants and effects of employees' organizational commitment (Meyer, Becker & Vandenberghe, 2004; Suma & Lesha, 2013; Sharma, Mohapatra & Rai, 2013), and its related concepts such as organizational identification (Dick et al., 2006) or organizational citizenship (Lee et al., 2004; Mamman et al., 2012; Organ, 1988). A broad range of studies showed that organizational commitment (OC) has in general a significant and positive impact on performance-related outcomes (Vandenberghe & Tremblay, 2008). It was also shown that the factors influencing the development of OC can be manifold and may include personal, job-related and organizational variables (Gonzales & Guillen, 2008; Sharma et al., 2013).

While there is a rich literature on OC in permanent organizational settings, only a few studies have yet considered it in the context of temporary organizations (TOs), such as projects and programs (Dwivedula, Bredillet & Müller, 2013; Tyssen, Wald & Heidenreich, 2014). Though permanent organizations (POs) and TOs are somehow related to another, there are certain characteristics that distinguish both organizational forms (Packendorff, 1995). Due to the characteristics of TOs, some antecedents of OC to the TO can be assumed to be different from those of OC to the PO. First, TOs are characterized by their ex ante limitation in their duration (temporariness) and TO-members are usually aware of the impending termination (Bakker, 2010; Lundin & Söderholm, 1995). Second, tasks in TOs are unique, less routine and more complex than in POs which also includes more uncertainty and risk (Brockhoff, 2006; Hanisch & Wald,

2014). Third, TO work is often out in ambiguous hierarchies, i.e. TO members can have different hierarchical positions in the TO and the PO (Nuhn, Heidenreich & Wald, 2016). Fourth, TOs are composed of experts with different disciplinary backgrounds (Hobday, 2000; Zwikael & Unger-Aviram, 2010) and finally, coordination in TOs relies less on formal structures and processes than in the PO as TO members often have a high degree of autonomy (Bechky, 2006; Janowicz-Panjaitan, Bakker & Kenis, 2009).

Prior research in organizational behavior has shown that the characteristics of TOs require a special attention when studying human resource management practices (Bredin & Söderlund, 2013; Huemann, 2015), citizenship behavior (Braun, Müller-Seitz & Sydow, 2012), leadership (Tyssen et al., 2014) or turnover intentions (Nuhn et al., 2016). In a similar vein, the antecedents of OC in POs are likely to differ in one or another way from those in TOs – whereas some of them might show similar effects, others might do the opposite. Identifying antecedents of OC in TOs not only contributes to the theoretical knowledge on the specificities of TOs but can also be valuable for practitioners. For instance, lacking OC can lead to high turnover between projects (Nuhn & Wald, 2016) and knowledge on the antecedents of OC may help to reduce turnover rates.

The study at hand intends to fill this gap in research by examining how the characteristics of TOs will affect an employee's organizational commitment. Thereby, we will examine how both prevalent job-related and organizational factors will affect an employee's TO commitment (TOC). As work in a TO is often added to that in the PO, it creates additional stress and can negatively affect the work-life balance of

employees (Nuhn et al., 2016). This can lead to a negative attitude towards the TO and reduce TOC. Therefore, we will also explore in how far an employee's work-life conflict as important situational factor might influence the relationship between job-related and organizational factors and TOC.

We contribute to existing research on organizational commitment and temporary organizations in four ways. First, we show how the characteristics of TOs will affect an employee's OC. Second, by simultaneously considering job-related and organizational factors, we extend previous works that only consider single antecedents of OC (e.g., Dwivedula et al., 2013; Tyssen et al., 2014). Third, as we will explore the mediating role of an employee's work-life conflict (WLC), we will contribute to the ongoing discussions about work-life integration, which represents a core challenge for many organizations (Abstein, Heidenreich & Spieth, 2014). Fourth, we advance research in the field of TOs by explicitly considering similarities and differences in the development of OC in TOs versus POs.

The remainder of this paper proceeds as follows. In the next section, the theoretical concepts and derived hypotheses of our study are introduced. Then, we describe our sample, data collection and measurement approach. Thereafter, we explain our data analysis and, subsequently, present and discuss our findings. Finally, we point out implications for theory and practice, followed by limitations and avenues for future research.

2. Organizational commitment in temporary organizations

The concept of organizational commitment can be traced back at least to the 1960s (Becker, 1960; Klein, Molloy & Cooper, 2009; see Mercurio, 2015, for a recent literature review). Organizational commitment can be described as an emotional and psychological state that portrays an employee's identification with an organization (Allen & Meyer, 1990; Mathieu & Zajac, 1990; O'Reilly & Chatman, 1986). Likewise, it can be understood as a measure of strength regarding an employee's affiliation with a company's goals and values (Mowday, Porter & Steers, 1982). In a more common way, it can also be seen as "a force that binds an individual to a course of action of relevance to one or more targets" (Meyer & Herscovitch, 2001: 301). As a result, committed employees are thought to be more active (Mowday, Steers & Porter, 1979), to work harder (Morrow, 1993) and to defend their firms core assets (Meyer & Allen, 1997).

According to Meyer and Allen (1991), there are three different components of OC that need to be distinguished – affective, continuance and normative. Affective OC describes the emotional link between an employee and its organization. He thereby strongly enjoys his membership in the organization, which occurs out of his own volition (Allen & Meyer, 1990; McShane & Glinow, 2008). Continuance OC refers to an employee's organizational involvement due to the perceived costs (e.g., financial loss) he would suffer from leaving it (Meyer & Allen, 1991). Normative OC reflects an employee's feeling of obligation towards a specific organization (e.g., due to moral or ethical reasons). Meyer and Allen's original concept was criticized for its fuzziness and multidimensionality. In a recent literature review, Mercurio (2015) identified affective commitment as the "core" of OC. This is also in the focus of our analysis.

Research on organizational commitment in POs is, in contrast to that in TOs, nothing new (Dwivedula, Bredillet & Müller, 2013). The antecedents of OC, for example, have already been rigorously investigated (e.g., Allen et al., 2004; Meyer & Allen, 1991; Paul & Anantharaman, 2004). Most of the observed antecedents can thereby be assigned to one of the following three categories (cf. Sharma, Mohapatra & Rai, 2013): personal factors (e.g., personal work ethics, personal attributes), job-related factors (e.g., work autonomy, job complexity, task significance) and organizational factors (e.g., leadership behavior, HR practices).

Due to the characteristics of TOs, we expect that prior identified antecedents of OC in POs will differ in one or another way from those in

the context of TOs. More precisely, we presume that some effects will be similar to that in POs, while others will be opposite. Using this assumption as a starting point, we will proceed by taking a closer look into the respective categories of OC antecedents. Thereby, we will focus on selected organizational and job-related factors that were studied in previous research on OC in POs that can also be important in the context of TOs. We exclude personal factors. Personality is an individual's typical characteristics that influences the way of thinking, feeling and acting independent of the situation (Ones, Viswesvaran & Dilchert, 2005). Therefore, there is no reason to assume that the influence of personal factors on organizational commitment in TOs differs from that in POs. Moreover, previous research has already investigated the relationship between personality factors and organizational commitment (Erdheim et al., 2006) and personality cannot be directly influenced by management (except when hiring personnel) whereas management can change organizational and job-related factors.

2.1. Job-related factors

The investigation of job-related factors as determinants of OC in POs has been of particular interest among scholars (e.g., Mathieu & Zajac, 1990; Sharma & Singh, 1991). Two important factors that have been analyzed in this context are work autonomy and job complexity. TOs are considered as flexible and autonomous forms of organizing, being especially suitable for solving complex job assignments (Hanisch & Wald, 2014). Therefore, we investigate how the influence of both work autonomy and job complexity on employees' OC will change in the context of TOs.

2.1.1. Work autonomy

Autonomy can be described as the degree of freedom an employee has regarding when, how and to what extent he performs his job (Fornes, Rocco & Wollard, 2008). High levels of autonomy are found to strengthen organizational commitment in POs (e.g., Allen et al., 2004; Mathieu & Zajac, 1990). Whereas POs are typically based on formal structures and processes, TOs are relying on more informal coordination mechanisms (Hanisch & Wald, 2014; Janowicz-Panjaitan et al., 2009). The new and to some extent unique tasks in TOs require a certain degree of autonomy. In general, TO members are likely to perceive more autonomy and flexibility during their work than employees in POs. High levels of autonomy will help keeping TO members motivated during their problem-solving processes (Nuhn et al., 2016; Spreitzer, 1995), which can have a positive impact on their commitment (Dwivedula et al., 2013). Conversely, a lack of autonomy may lead to frustration as the necessary degree of freedom for solving the TO tasks is not given. Hence, we hypothesize:

H1. Work autonomy *positively* influences TOC.

2.1.2. Job complexity

Dealing with complexity is challenging and time-consuming process (Geraldi, Maylor & Williams, 2011; Hanisch & Wald, 2014). Complexity was also considered by many prior studies in the context of POs as a determinant for employees' turnover intentions (e.g., Chung-Yan, 2010), which can lead to a decrease of their OC. TOs, on the other hand, are seen as an appropriate means to cope with complex job assignments (Bechky, 2006) and empirically Hanisch and Wald (2014) showed that TOs have in fact a high degree of "complexity resistance". It can be expected, that this will also have an impact on the OC of TO members for several reasons.

First, each member of a TO is typically allocated to a specific part of the TO's goal achievement process. As a result, he will perceive a certain degree of self-esteem and ambition (Nuhn & Wald, 2016) which subsequently enhances his job satisfaction (Judge, Timothy, & Bono 2001). It can thereby be assumed that this effect might be even further enhanced by the task's complexity.