

A STUDY ON THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ORGANIZATIONAL COMMITMENT AND TASK PERFORMANCE IN CHINESE CONSTRUCTION FIRMS

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In the Chinese construction field, it is more difficult for the firms to hold the current position because of changes in construction technology and materials. To gain continuous improvement of their performance has become their utmost focus, in this way, the firms have to study how to learn as an organism. Organizational commitment enhances the employees' feelings of security, efficacy, loyalty and duty; encourage creativity and reduce absenteeism. This study is going to investigate if there is a relationship between organizational commitment and task performance under the setting of Chinese construction firms through organizational learning theory. By investigating such relationship, it is hoped to stimulate the development of a more thorough understanding of the constructs, which may provide guidance to managers of construction firms to better manage their human resource in order to improve the employees' task performance as well as the performance of the whole organization.

Keywords: organizational commitment, organizational learning, task performance.

INTRODUCTION

The construction industry is a relatively conflicting and demanding industry compared to other industries. For instance, Dainty, *et al.* (2000) allege that the mostly male-dominated industry, such as construction, promotes ruthless competition, and, hence, conflict. It is necessary for the construction firms to achieve continuous improvement on their performance in order to remain competitive.

In light of China's entry into the WTO, problems in human resource management have stimulated interest in the study of organizational commitment, especially in fast developing cities such as Shanghai, Beijing, Tianjin, etc. How employers may recruit newcomers and retain veterans by motivating their employees to improve their performance (Kanter, 1989; Zangaro, 2001) becomes important.

This study interprets the relationship between employees' organizational commitment and their task performance through organizational learning, and how the organizational learning ability of Chinese construction firms affects the relationship between organizational commitment and task performance. The focus is on employees' performance with organizational commitment as the behavioural predictor (Becker *et al.*, 1990; Mowday *et al.*, 1982), and examining the implementation of a learning culture within the firms which may lead to improved performance.

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PERFORMANCE AND LEARNING

Organizational performance is defined as “the aggregate of all the individual’s behavior within the organization over time” (Mitchell, 1983). And the individual’s performance is simply defined as “all of the behaviors an employee engages in while at work” (Jex, 1998).

While some researchers define performance in terms of task performance, not all the behaviors an employee displays at work are related to specific tasks. In a study of enlisted military personnel (Bialek *et al.*, 1977), it is found that less than half of their work time is spent performing tasks that are specific to their task descriptions (e.g. making personal phone calls).

According to Campbell *et al.* (1993), performance can be defined in terms of the behavior employees display at work, and such behaviors must contribute to an organization’s goals in order to be considered in the domain of task performance. Such definition decreases the chance of excluding those behaviors that are not strictly considered a part of task requirements, but often contribute to organizational goals.

Chatting during work should not be considered part of task performance, although it can be argued that it helps the person to put in a better performance (perhaps by relieving stress). This example suggests that task performance should not only be evaluated by the length of work but attitude, and the way one works should also be taken into account. Campbell (1990) points out that there are three basic aspects in the evaluation of job performance in most kinds of disciplines, namely job-specific task proficiency, demonstrating effort, and maintaining personal discipline.

Previous research concerning the determinants of task performance include those of Campbell (1990); Jamal (1985); Murphy (1990); and Sternberg (1994); etc. Within the construction field, Pinto and Slevin (1988) establish that ten critical success factors are related significantly to project success; Jaselskis and Ashley (1991) investigate optimal allocation of project management resources; and Chua *et al.* (1997) identify key management factors that affect budget performance.

To gain continuous improvement, organizational learning theory adopts the view that the organization is an organism which can study to learn to survive. Firms hardly need any learning to sustain their competitiveness in an unchanging business environment (McGill and Slocum, 1993). So, with entering WTO, more competitors from outside the country with their highly advanced techniques, especially in management, make the Chinese construction firms realize that it is more difficult survive without learning. The way forward is to seek new knowledge and to engage in learning generative processes that sustain continuous improvement to cope with their evolving business environment.

ORGANIZATIONAL LEARNING

The driving force behind the development of organizational learning theory is the assumption that organizations require an effective learning ability if they are to succeed in a complex, competitive and changing world (Senge, 1990). Learning is the key in the heart of a company’s ability to adapt to a rapidly changing environment, in order to identify opportunities that others might not see and to exploit those opportunities rapidly and fully (Popper and Lipshitz, 2000).

Huber (1991) defines organizational learning as a process through which the range of potential behaviors of organizations is changed through their processing of

information. The learning process involves knowledge acquisition which is distributed and shared among the organization members. The shared information will then be given commonly understood interpretations which form the basis of actions and evaluation of outcomes.

The organization must act upon the knowledge resulting from organizational learning in order to realize improvement in performance. Actions on the knowledge may lead to change to organizations, which may involve developing and marketing new products, adopting new processes, or entering new markets. An organization committed to learning is likely to possess the more updated techniques and information.

With the ability to learn, construction firms can communicate with the outside, take advantage from the environment, its partners, even its competitors, and the most important is that the firm can provide its employees a learning environment.

Researchers are interested in how to assess the organization's learning ability (for example, Appelbaum and Walter, 1997; Calantone, *et al.*, 2002;), and different dimensions are introduced. Learning orientation influences what kind of information is gathered (Dixon, 1992) and how it is interpreted (Argyris and Schon, 1978), evaluated (Sinkular, *et al.* 1997), and shared (Moorman and Miner, 1998). Learning orientation has been found to be positively related with the firm innovativeness as well as the firm performance (Calantone, *et al.*, 2002). However, how such ability of the organization influence the individual's behavior is not clear, e.g., if an organization's learning orientation can bring an innovative culture to the organization (Calantone, *et al.*, 2002), then how may the employees' task performance and organizational commitment may be enhanced?

ORGANIZATIONAL COMMITMENT AND TASK PERFORMANCE

Merriam-Webster online dictionary defines commitment as an agreement or pledge to do something in the future: (1) an engagement to assume a financial obligation at a future date, (2) something pledged, and (3) the state or an instance of being obligated or emotionally impelled. Additionally, a person who is committed to an organization should be dedicated to and have a strong belief in the organization's goals and values (Porter *et al.*, 1974).

Apart from organizational commitment, there are other forms of commitment related to the behavioral and psychological aspects, such as union (Gordon *et al.*, 1980), job (Rusbult and Farrell, 1983), career (Blau, 1985), team (Bishop and Scott, 2000), and personal goals (Locke and Latham, 1990). Researchers agree that commitment can be broadly classified into three categories: namely, organizational commitment (including company or union commitment); project/task commitment (including job and career commitment), and personal goal commitment. In this study, attention will only be paid to organizational commitment.

The most widely accepted conceptualization is that organizational commitment is the relative strength of an individual's identification with and involvement in a particular organization (Mowday *et al.*, 1982), i.e., organizational commitment is characterized by three factors: (1) a strong belief in and acceptance of the organization's goals and values, (2) a willingness to exert considerable effort on behalf of the organization; and (3) a strong desire to maintain membership in the organization.

Since the 1970s, two views of the concept of organizational commitment have dominated the literature. The first view refers to organizational commitment as a behavior (Becker, 1960; Blau and Boal, 1987; Salancik, 1977, etc.). In the behavioral approach, the research focus is on overt manifestations of commitment. An employee becomes committed to an organization because of 'sunk costs' (e.g., fringe benefits, salary as a function of age or tenure), and it is too costly for the employee to leave (Blau and Boal, 1987). The second view refers to organizational commitment as an attitude (Etzioni, 1961; Kanter, 1989; Zangaro, 2001), wherein organizational commitment is defined as a 'state in which an employee identifies with a particular organization and its goals' (Blau and Boal, 1987).

According to the two different views of organizational commitment, there are two important conceptualizations of commitment popular in the empirical literature from Porter *et al.* (1974) and Becker (1960). According to Porter, *et al.* (1974), organizational commitment is "the strength of an individual's identification with and involvement in a particular organization." Becker (1960), on the other hand, describes organizational commitment as the tendency to engage in "consistent lines of activity" because of the perceived cost of doing otherwise, e.g., the loss of attractive benefits and seniority, the disruption of personal relationships created by moving to another location, the effort expended in seeking a new job, etc. (Becker and McCall, 1990).

The two divergent views of Porter *et al.* (1974) and Becker (1960) are explained by Meyer and Allen (1990) as affective commitment and continuance commitment. Affective commitment involves the employee's emotional attachment, identification with, and involvement in the organization, i.e., similar to Mowday *et al.*'s (1982) attitudinal commitment and Sheldon's (1971) definition of organizational commitment. Continuance commitment involves the employee's costs associated with leaving the organization analogous to the organizational commitment concept proposed by Becker (1960).

RESEARCH RATIONALE

Organizational commitment has always been an important attitudinal predictor of employee behavior and intentions (Becker and McCall, 1990; Mowday *et al.*, 1982). The consequences of organizational commitment include retention, attendance, and job productivity, etc. (McNeese-Smith, 1995; Zangaro, 2001). Research suggests that employees who exhibit organizational commitment are happier at their work, spend less time away from their jobs, and are less likely to leave the organization. Hence, if an employee is morally committed to an organization, the following can be expected: increased likelihood of retention, consistent attendance, and increased productivity. It can, therefore, be postulated that the committed employees will perform better than the uncommitted employees.

On the other hand, studies show that organizational commitment is always influenced by two factors, namely, personal factors including employee's gender, age, tenure, and employee's education level (Mathieu and Zajac, 1990, Mowday *et al.* 1982); situation factors such as job characteristic (Gregersen and Black, 1992, Mowday, 1983), organizational characteristics (Angle and Perry, 1981) and employee's work experience (Mathieu and Zajac, 1990; Randall, 1990). Among these factors, the construct of job satisfaction is always positively correlated with organizational commitment.

Although previous studies have shown the strong correlation between affective commitment and variables such as employee's turnover, retention, job satisfaction, etc. (see Angle and Perry, 1981; Ingersoll *et al.* 2000; Zangaro, 2001), the relationship between continuous commitment and those variables has not met.

Hence, the research objectives are to investigate:

- ◆ the relationship between employees' affective commitment and their task performance; and
- ◆ how the organizational learning ability of Chinese construction firms affects the relationship between organizational commitment and task performance, as well as affects employees' affective and their task performance, respectively.

DEVELOPING A RESEARCH MODEL

The basic framework of this research is the B-P-O (Behavior-Performance-Outcome) cycle which is developed from the S-O-R (Stimulus-Organism-Response) paradigm in industrial/organizational psychology to understand the relationship between behavior, performance, and outcome by Liu and Walker (1998) at the project level. Since this study focuses on the goal-oriented acts and the construct of outcome is the goal-directed evaluation of performance, goal setting is fundamental in the B-P-O cycle (Figure 1).

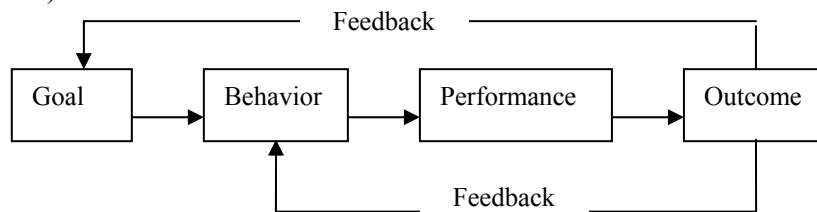


Figure 1: G-B-P-O cycle

The individual forms his/her personal goal in accordance with the organization's goal (or the project team's goal), and then the individual consume certain amount of resources (time and effort) on the particular task assigned to him/her, the aggregation of which over time forms his/her performance on that task. Performance is evaluated against the original goal and certain remedial actions may be taken based on the feedback from outcome assessment.

Organizational commitment is an important attitudinal predictor of employee's behavior and intentions (Becker and McCall, 1990; Mowday *et al.*, 1982), as it includes the employee's belief and acceptance of the organization's goals and values (Mowday *et al.*, 1982). A major antecedent of organizational commitment is satisfaction (see Angle and Perry, 1981; Mathieu and Zajac, 1990; Randall, 1993, etc.) which is regarded as a second level outcome (Liu and Walker, 1998), i.e., a first level outcome, (such as typing 80 words per minute), can be instrumental to a second level affective outcome (such as satisfaction). Since satisfaction is an antecedent to commitment, it is postulated that there exists a feedback loop from outcome to organizational commitment as shown in Figure 2.

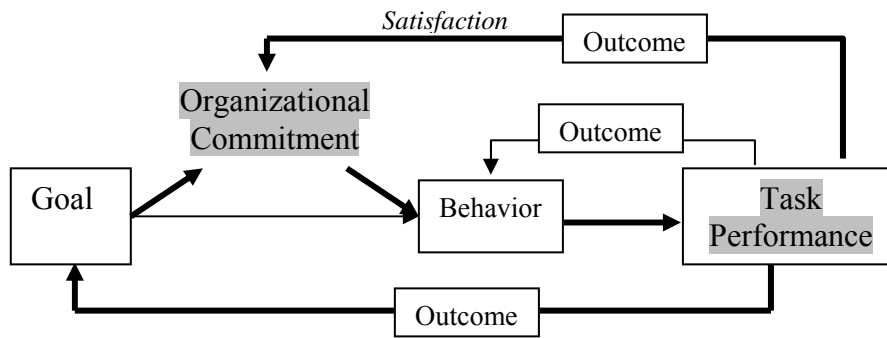


Figure: 2: G-B-P-O cycle with Organizational Commitment

Organizational learning theory suggests that learning involves changes in the organizational knowledge, i.e., variations in the depth as well as the content of the organizational knowledge. Probst and Buchel (1997) develop three different levels of learning to explain such changes, namely, adaptive learning, reconstructive learning, and process learning, which are integrated into the G-B-P-O cycle in Figure 3.

Adaptive learning is defined as the process of adjusting effectively to given goals and norms by mastering the environment (Probst and Buchel, 1997). When individuals find it difficult to achieve their goals through carrying out certain behaviors, they would doubt the organization’s directions (Argyris and Schon, 1978), and their commitment to the organization may reduce. Under such condition, the organization is supposed to learn (gain new information) through interaction with the internal and external environments to improve employees’ commitment and performance.

Reconstruction learning changes the content of the organizational knowledge. Reconstruction learning is defined as the process of questioning organizational values in order to build a new value framework (Probst and Buchel, 1997). With failure in goal-achievement, individuals realize that there may be problems not only in the theory-in-use (which sets the directions for everybody), but also in the organization’s value system from which the original goal is developed. Consequently, organization would modify its value system to gain acceptance from its employees, and such acceptance would affect the employees’ commitment to the organization.

The highest level of learning is process learning which is defined as learning to learn. It consists of gaining insight into the learning process (Probst and Buchel, 1997). Organization, as an organism, is likely to protect itself from the threat of change (Argyris, 1990). When adapting its theory-in-use, or rebuilding its value system, the organization has chosen to modify its original knowledge content. The ability of the organization in “learning to learn” is the highest level of learning.

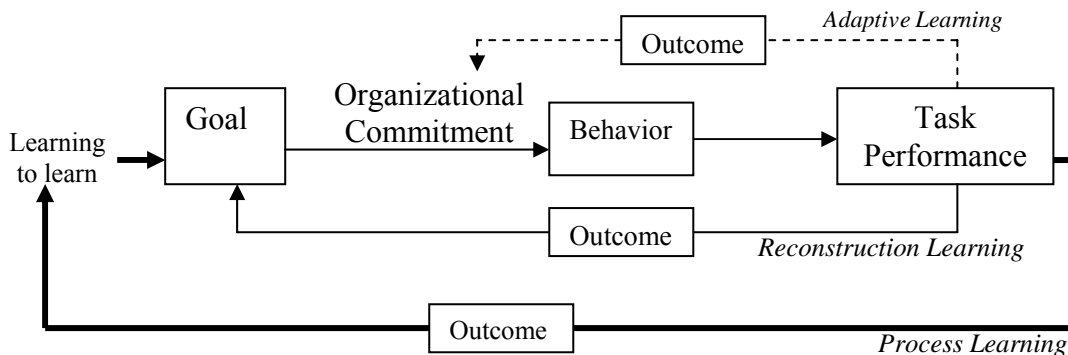


Figure 3: Research Model

RESEARCH DESIGN

The study is carried out in 2 stages, stage 1 includes a pilot study to test the reliability of the existing questionnaires on organizational commitment and organizational learning ability. Stage 2 develops a measurement instrument for task performance, and involves case studies to test the relationship of (1) organizational commitment and task performance and (2) project performance and organizational learning.

This paper reports the results from the pilot study in stage 1. Organizational commitment scale from Meyer and Allen's (1997) is used for testing the employees' affective commitment and continuous commitment. It is postulated that affective commitment would have a relationship with organizational learning ability.

Demographic data such as age, tenure, educational level, and whether the subject has obtained certificate from MOC (ministry of construction, China), are included in the questionnaire.

To measure the organization's learning ability, learning orientation scale developed by Calantone, *et al.* (2002) is adopted. In the scale, learning orientation is a second-order construct, and it is indicated by four dimensions which are commitment to learning, shared vision, open-mindedness, and intra-organizational knowledge sharing. (for detail, see Calantone, *et al.*, 2002). Five-point likert scales are adopted in both scales, where 1 represents "strongly disagree" and 5 represents "strongly agree".

Data analysis mainly focuses on the reliability of the scales, and the relationship between organizational commitment and organizational learning ability, and the influence of demographic variables on organizational commitment.

RESULTS

Standard interviews are conducted with 15 subjects (mid-level management personnel in the project management team) from three selected major construction firms in China. The demographic characteristics of this sample are as follows: 73.3% younger than 30 years, 27.7% older than 30years; 60% with less than 5 years of organizational tenure, 33.3% between 5 and 15 years, and 6.7% more than 20 years; 66.7% have a bachelor degrees; and 33.3% have certificates from the MOC (Ministry of Construction, China).

Reliability coefficients are 0.82 for affective commitment (AC); 0.791 for continuous commitment (CC); and 0.836 for organizational learning ability.

In Table 1, the older employees tend to be more affectively committed to the firms (similar to the results from Mathieu and Zajac's, (1990) meta-analytic research between age and affective commitment).

Table 1: Demographic Variables

	N	Affective Commitment	
		Mean	Std. Deviation
Age	≥40	5	2.9583
	<40	10	3.5417
Tenure	≥10	4	3.1875
	<10	11	3.5114
Certification	Y	5	2.9750
	N	10	3.6500

The subjects with more than 10-year's tenure show higher affective commitment. However, tenure is closely correlated with age, and research on affective commitment suggests when employees' age is removed from the relationship between tenure and affective commitment, correlation may reduce considerably (Allen and Meyer, 2000).

Subjects who have obtained the certificates from MOC show a higher level of affective commitment. Reason may be that those who are certified as professionals have more opportunities, so their affective commitment towards the organization may not be higher.

In Table 2, it is shown that affective commitment and organizational learning ability have a significantly positive relationship ($r=0.549$, $p<0.05$). When the firm's learning ability is high, it provides more opportunities for the employees to self-developed, adopt new information and to stay competitive. The affectively committed employees tend to accept the organization's goal(s) and values, and are more likely to stay in that firm.

However there seems no strong evidence to suggest the relationship between organization learning ability and continuous commitment. The content of continuous commitment involves employee's cost of leaving such as salary, pension, etc., which have little relationship with the learning ability of the organization. The above supports future focus on relationships of organizational commitment with affective only.

Table 2: Organizational Commitment and Organizational Learning Ability

	Affective Commitment (AC)	Continuous Commitment (CC)	Organizational Learning Ability (LA)
AC	1	.241	.588(*)
CC		1	-.435
LA			1
mean	2.5750	3.1407	2.2078
Std. Deviation	.78034	.83303	.55086

Note: * $p<0.05$

CONCLUSIONS

Commitment can enhance feeling of security, efficacy, loyalty and duty (Meyer *et al.*, 1993); encourage creativity (O'Reilly and Chatman, 1986); and reduce absenteeism (Sagie, 1998). This pilot study investigates the relationship between organizational commitment and organizational learning ability. From the pilot study, demographic variables such as age, tenure, etc. have been found to be related with organizational commitment (especially with the affective commitment), and organizational learning ability is also positively correlated with organizational commitment. However, relationship between organizational commitment and task performance is still to be examined.

There are many limitations in this pilot study due to time constraint, for example, the sample size is not very satisfactory, and for such reason, many analysis techniques can not be applied; also the structures of age and tenure do not meet the requirement of diversification, e.g. most of the subjects are younger than 30 years old and with less than 10-year's tenure.

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