

# MANAGING KNOWLEDGE WORKERS' COMMITMENT IN SMALL CONSTRUCTION PROFESSIONAL FIRMS

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Construction professional services (CPS) rely heavily on knowledge workers as their main resources in delivering their services. One of the main concerns in managing these workers is the development and maintenance of organisational commitment. Smaller firms, with more informal human resource management systems and practices are more likely to face challenges in managing their knowledge workers' commitment. Arguably, the intrinsic characteristics of the construction industry mean that this effort of managing knowledge workers' commitment will require an appropriate management framework for its successful implementation. This research seeks to develop a framework for informing the management of knowledge workers in a way that fosters organisational commitment in small CPS firms. Interviews with the employers of small CPS firms were conducted to explore some of the important issues such as the strategies and challenges associated with effectively managing knowledge workers' organisational commitment. The findings reveal that employers associate commitment with loyalty and high quality work. Many strategies are used to influence commitment such as performance-based compensation, close working relationship, training, employee involvement in decision making and two-way communication. Meanwhile, the provision of job security and career advancement were seen as the biggest challenges in managing knowledge workers' commitment. Finally, we conclude with limitations and implications of the findings that provide directions for future research.

Keywords: construction professional firms, knowledge workers, organisational commitment, SMEs.

## INTRODUCTION

Small professional firms are recognised as being important in the UK construction industry, both in terms of their contribution to economic output and in terms of their social impact on the lives of the many employees who work for them. In 2006, CPS sector employed approximately 270,000 employees and the fee income generated by this sector amounted to approximately £13.9 billion. There are around 27,950 CPS firms in the UK and the vast majority (97.6%) have less than 50 employees (CIC *et al.* 2007). The trade that these firms offer is their capacity to produce, rather than a

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product like many other organisations. In order to do this, they rely heavily on their knowledge workers, and their reputation for delivering the services promised.

Accordingly, the concept of organisational commitment is very relevant to these firms who rely heavily on their knowledge workers. Generally, the findings from previous research show that organisations that create and maintain good quality employee-manager relationships will benefit from higher levels of employee motivation, commitment and job satisfaction, which in turn impacted positively on the intention to stay and employee performance (Leung *et al.* 2004; Benkhoff 1997; Becker *et al.* 1996). However, the employment relationship and the influences on organisational commitment have not received much empirical attention to date, particularly from the perspective of small CPS firms. Hence, there are large gaps in the body of knowledge in this area. The aim of this research is to contribute to this underdeveloped area of human resource management (HRM), by developing a framework for managing the organisational commitment of knowledge workers. This paper reports on an exploratory study involving interviews with the owner/managers of a range of such professional service firms.

## **ORGANISATIONAL COMMITMENT**

Organisational commitment has become a widely used and popular term that has been defined in many different ways. Generally, the concept is complex and most often has been defined as a distinct and unique construct that defines how strong the individual's beliefs and attitudes towards the employing organisation and its goal. According to Mowday (1979), those who are committed to the organisation can be characterised by at least three interrelated factors:

1. A strong belief in and an acceptance to organisation's goals and values;
2. A willingness to exert considerable effort on behalf of the organisation; and
3. A strong desire to maintain membership in the organisation.

Swales (2002) argues that the classic definition of commitment that incorporates or associates with the desire to remain with organisation, is less relevant and may not be a realistic expectation in the current high-pressure working environments. Generally, employers tend to be more concerned about business turnover rather than employee turnover. This is particularly relevant during the current slowdown of the economy, which is evident from increased job cuts across the construction industry. The emphasis on acceptance of organisational goals and consistent behaviour or action towards achieving the goals, therefore, are more likely to be agreed by many authors as factors that define organisational commitment (Bar-Haim 2007; Meyer and Herscovitch 2001; Brown 1996). Similarly, Singh and Vinnicombe (2000) in their attempt to re-examine the meaning of commitment have found that top managers in contemporary organisations relate commitment to action (i.e. being proactive and taking the initiative) and innovation (i.e. being creative, innovative and by adding value). Furthermore, Benkhoff (1997: 706) posited that "the kinds of behaviour that can be interpreted as a sign of commitment will depend on job descriptions and rewards systems and therefore can vary between organisations." Clearly, there is a need to define commitment from small CPS firms' perspective, by studying and developing an understanding on what the employers mean by organisational commitment and how the knowledge workers express it.

From a construction industry perspective, the concept of organisational commitment can be seen as particularly important given the transient, project-based nature of the

sector is likely to adversely affect it. Rousseau (1998) suggests that in temporary work systems, such as construction projects, employees' identification is likely to focus on immediate work stimuli and erode when tasks are complete. In this difficult context, it is pertinent to investigate factors that shape the employees' sense of attachment and involvement with their employing organisations. Previous findings have shown that organisations benefit from a committed workforce because committed employees tend to be absent less often, to make positive contributions and to stay with the organisation (Igarria and Siegel 1992; Steers 1977; Hackman and Lawler 1971). There is evidence that satisfaction and stress did not directly affect turnover intentions but only through commitment (Elangovan 2001). This finding suggests that any interventions to influence satisfaction, for example by changing job characteristics and pay, will not directly affect turnover but will only serve as one indirect approach for affecting commitment. Therefore, from a practical standpoint, interventions aimed at affecting turnover need to focus more on influencing commitment. There is also evidence that knowledge workers with a high level of commitment to the employing organisations are more likely to share their knowledge (Robertson and Hammersley 2000). Committed employees would 'go the extra mile' in pursuit of improved communication within teams to provide informed and insightful advice to project managers and project teams. This implies another importance of commitment, it helps the knowledge management initiatives, for increased firm performance.

Despite the obvious benefits that commitment can bring to organisations, it is important to recognise the difficulties in generating it. For example, commitment to organisations may be more difficult for knowledge workers, who are likely to have a prior commitment to their profession, which is more enduring than their commitment to the organisation (Tam *et al.* 2002; Sheldon 1971). According to Leung and Chan (2007: 122) "construction professionals often have their own professional values. If there is a gap between their professional values (e.g. aesthetic design, professional ethics, reputation and promotion) and the project values (e.g. cost savings, market value and client's profit), they may decide to leave the project or company". This raises the importance of managing the knowledge workers effectively to secure their commitment to the organisation.

## **HR PRACTICES AND COMMITMENT**

Organisational commitment is a desired outcome of HRM strategies given its links to positive attitudes and behaviours in the pursuit of change (Swales 2004). Previous research has revealed individual HR practices that influence commitment which include salary and remuneration (Tam *et al.* 2002), training and development (Acton *et al.* 2003) and career prospects (Morris *et al.* 1993; Lingard and Lin 2004). Other researchers have found that satisfaction with: 1) performance appraisal; 2) rewards and recognition; 3) involvement; 4) communication; 5) openness; and 6) work-life balance were important for explaining knowledge workers' commitment (Kinnie *et al.* 2005). Hence, there is evidence that the way HRM practices are being implemented may be a more important determinant of employee attitudes than the number of practices put in place (e.g. Edgar and Geare 2005). As contended by Kinnie *et al.* (2005: 25) "...it is not simply a question of designing the most appropriate HR policy mix. The key issue is how those policies are perceived by employees, how they are actually implemented and experienced as HR practices." In other words, it is the quality of practices that matter, and not the quantity.

Clearly, it is important for construction organisations to design and implement the right mix of HR practices that can positively influence employees’ organisational commitment. This effort can be difficult with current issues pertaining to HRM practices in the construction industry that have caused many problem such as low commitment, de-motivated workforce, high workloads, long working hours, stress, psychological burnout and high levels of staff turnover (Dainty *et al.* 2007; Sang *et al.* 2007; Chartered Institute of Building 2006; Raiden 2004). Furthermore, research has shown that the smaller firms are more likely to face challenges in managing their knowledge workers (Causer and Jones 1993). It seems that HRM in smaller firms tends to be more informal compared with the formal HRM systems and practices in larger firms. For instance, larger firms in the construction sector are more likely to have a documented recruitment and retention strategy in place (CIC 2004). The ways in which small construction firms manage their knowledge workers’ organisational commitment remains under-researched.

Work by Roehling *et al.* (2000) using content-analysis demonstrated the expectations of both the employers and employees of the new employment relationship. It appears that the new employment relationship is characterised by a greater emphasis by employers to provide training and skill developments rather than job security. Similarly, employees are expected to assume responsibility for developing and maintaining skills and to put more effort/action (e.g. produce positive results, take initiative, work in teams) rather than remaining loyal to organisation. These employees’ traits of the new employment relationship are similar to recent definition of employee commitment that relates commitment more to behaviour and action rather than loyalty. Accordingly, Roehling *et al.* (2000) argue that approaches to promote commitment that have been relied upon heavily in the past are no longer relevant in the new employment relationship as is summarised in Table 1.

*Table 1: Approaches to Developing and Maintaining Employee Commitment*  
 Source: Roehling *et al.* (2000)

Traditional and Characteristic of the Old Employment Relationship	Available and Increasingly Important in the New Employment Relationship
Job security	Participative decision-making
Career advancement (within organisation)	Sharing of rewards and risk (a stake in the outcome)
Promise of pay raises	Accommodating employees personal/non-work needs
	Intrinsically rewarding work
	Social networks in the work place
	External employability
	Respectful and fair treatment

Accordingly, in achieving the desired attitude and behavioural changes among employees, it is essential to understanding the objectives, motives, ideologies, perspectives and expectations, of both the organisation and its employees. Loosemore *et al.* (2003) argued that, “failing to understanding and meeting what employees expect and require from the employment relationship will lead to deterioration in commitment and loyalty, decline in performance and increased employee turnover.” As contented by Roehling *et al.* (2000: 305), “the nature of the employment relationship is central to a wide range of HRM activities”. It is through the

employment relationship, that reciprocal rights and obligations of both employers and employees are created and maintained. Understanding the employment relationship demand answers to questions like: What are knowledge workers' expectation? Does the existing employment relationship meet their expectation? What are employers' expectation with the current business competition and more dynamic environments? Knowing the answers to these questions can provide better understanding of the nature of the employment relationship that might influence the efforts of managing employees' commitment.

## **RESEARCH METHOD**

The focus of the study reported here was on SMEs for two reasons. First, there is very little research conducted in the area using these types of organisation, particularly from the small CPS firms' perspective. Second, by nature of the industrial structure of the UK, the majority of the firms are SMEs, therefore this study is necessary since small CPS firms are recognised as being important in the UK construction industry, both economically and socially.

As commitment is such an abstract and complex construct concerned with values, attitudes and behaviours, a qualitative approach (i.e. research interview) was adopted to elicit the meanings and to facilitate exploration of the key issues related to the research. As contended by Brown (1996: 376), "researchers may need to seek closer contact with the participants they are studying and develop an understanding on what they mean by organisational commitment, how they express it, and if the meaning attached to organisational commitment varies across different professions and work groups". Clearly, there is a need to explore the meaning of commitment from small CPS firms' employer perspective that is likely to influence employers' actions to enhance the desired commitment behaviour. Furthermore, what employers mean by the term 'commitment' might influence their appraisal on the employees' performance and commitment, as well as promotion decision based on such appraisals. Accordingly, the interviews focused on exploring the meaning of commitment from the employers' perspective as well as identifying the strategies and challenges in managing knowledge workers' commitment. The understanding of these issues is essential for further research on knowledge workers' commitment from the perspective of small CPS firms.

This study focuses on a single occupation to eliminate variations that might be related to type of occupation (Swales 2004). Within this study, quantity surveyors in small CPS firms were studied. Small CPS firms specialising in quantity surveying were identified from Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors (RICS) regional directories for the East Midlands and West Midlands. The firms were then contacted to gather information on the size (i.e. number of staff employed) and also personnel with responsibility for HR matters. A letter explaining the intention to conduct the research interview was sent to each HR practitioner. A telephone call was made to each owner/manager to make arrangements for the research interview. Five firms agreed to participate in this research including two quantity surveying practices, two architectural and quantity surveying practices and one multi-disciplinary practice (see Table 2). All five interviewees had senior position such as the Director and Senior HR Manager and all had many years of experience within the industry (see Table 2). All five interviews were conducted on company premises and lasted for about one hour.

Table 2: Company background

Organisation	Position	Services provided	Number of employees	Years of experience with current company	Total years of working experience
A	Senior QS/ Managing QS	Quantity surveying	11	8	13
B	Director	Quantity surveying	22	8	28
C	Director	Multi-disciplinary (Architectural, quantity surveying, engineering and project management)	28	19	32
D	HR/Finance Partner	Architectural and quantity surveying	21	9	38
E	Practice Manager	Architectural and quantity surveying	40	8	20

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### Definitions of Commitment

Generally, the employers of small CPS firms share similar meanings of commitment with the top responses being ‘loyalty’ and ‘produce high quality work’. From the interviews, four employers defined commitment as broadly meaning ‘loyalty to the organisation’. Even in the time of economic downturn and difficulty in securing projects, the employers still put strong emphasis on employee loyalty. This finding contradicts Singh and Vinnicombe (2000) in their work involving interviews with 37 senior engineers in UK and Swedish engineering companies that found ‘loyalty’ was not cited as meaning of commitment. One possible explanation might be the nature of organisation involved in Singh and Vinnicombe (2000) study that is large organisations is more concerned with action and innovation with less worry about employee recruitment and retention. Another possible reason might be due to the small CPS firms’ difficult experience in employee recruitment and retention over the past few years. In relation to that, they seem concerned about the loss that the organisations have to bear such as replacement cost if knowledge workers leave the organisation:

Apart from a strong emphasis on employee loyalty, small CPS firms’ employers also associate the term ‘commitment’ to ‘quality’. Three employers relate employees’ action to follow quality assurance methods and uphold professional standards as being committed. Other meanings of commitment held by the employers are mostly related to employees’ action that is important to producing high quality work such as putting extra effort, dedicated and hardworking. These findings are consistent with Singh and Vinnicombe (2000) and also in line with recent definitions of commitment in the literature that define commitment as behaviour or action towards achieving the organisational goals (Bar-Haim 2007; Meyer and Herscovitch 2001; Brown 1996). Many of the responses suggested that employers are concern about how knowledge workers’ commitment might influence their work outcome and performance that ultimately influence client relationship.

### **Strategies to Influence Commitment**

There are many strategies adopted by small CPS firms' employers to develop and maintain knowledge workers' commitment. These are consistent with the results of Roehling *et al.* (2000) content-analysis that demonstrate few expectations of the employees of the new employment relationship. Six strategies that were cited by all five firms are: 1) performance-based compensation; 2) training, education and skill development opportunities; 3) friendly and cooperative work environment; 4) open, honest, two-way communication; 5) employee involvement in decision making/empowerment; and 6) flexibility.

Interestingly, three employers cited performance-based compensation like salary, bonus and profit share as their first response when asked to describe HR strategy used to influence knowledge workers' commitment. Furthermore, all five firms believe performance-based compensation (specifically reasonable and competitive salary) is important to influence knowledge workers' commitment. These findings imply that their effort to manage knowledge workers' commitment is heavily focused on financial incentives.

Apart from financial incentives, the employers believe that the firms' commitment to provide training and skill development opportunities to knowledge workers helps enhancing organisational commitment. The firms have provision for financing training e.g. degree courses and one day release weekly to support staff on training (i.e. part-time degree). Furthermore, being smaller firms allow the firms to have more friendly and close working relationship and also more informal and open communication that were seen as important factors determining knowledge workers' commitment to the organisation. In addition, the knowledge workers are also involved in decision making process and enjoy flexible working arrangements. Other strategies (not cited by all five firms) that are used to influence knowledge workers' commitment to the organisation are regular staff meetings to coordinate work and to discuss workloads and any problems, social activities like sport and gathering, praise, acknowledgement, recognition (non-monetary) and performance appraisal.

To sum up, this finding demonstrates that small CPS firms use a mix of HR practices to develop and maintain knowledge workers' organisational commitment. There is a need to capture knowledge workers' perceptions of HR practices as well as the policies themselves and how they link satisfaction with HR practices to their commitment to the organisation. One important avenue for further work would be the development of a framework for informing the management of knowledge workers of ways that foster organisational commitment in small CPS firms. The design of HR strategies to develop and maintain knowledge workers' commitment needs to take account of both business strategy and employee interests, particularly in the current economic downturn.

### **Challenges in Managing Commitment**

The interviews revealed some challenges faced by the employers in their efforts to manage knowledge workers' commitment. At the time of the interviews, small CPS firms were concerned about the economic crisis, particularly the slowdown of the construction industry. They highlighted the difficulty in securing projects since end of 2007. Consequently, due to decreasing workload, they are struggling to find enough work "to keep everybody busy" in the company. The employers emphasised the challenge to keep providing work and to offer job variety in order to make the knowledge workers feeling occupied, content and secure in the current economic

downturn. Furthermore, few employers have found it very difficult to offer career advancement since there is very limited higher position within smaller practices. Other challenges deal with monitoring knowledge workers' commitment to ensure high quality work and also managing individual knowledge workers, particularly younger staff who are seen as being more committed to individual career ambition. There were few cases where younger staff left the practices for many reasons such as for higher pay, to set up own business, to further study and struggling to perform in a professional service firms. This finding raises an interesting and important avenue for further work that would provide a better understanding of the effects of company's current issues on the employment relationship and the appropriate strategies to deal with the challenges.

## **CONCLUSION AND FURTHER RESEARCH**

This study sought to determine the nature of employee commitment in small CPS firms in the UK from an employer's perspective. It drew from their vast experience, knowledge and understanding of the concept and the approaches used by their organisations to influence knowledge workers' commitment.

The research interviews have provided useful perspectives about knowledge workers' commitment from small CPS firms' employers and compared these responses to existing literature. Since the research was conducted within small organisations in the UK construction industry, the findings themselves can not be generalised to the wider organisational audience.

The acknowledgement by employers that knowledge workers' commitment is important and might influence their work outcome and performance is apparent and compatible with the literature on commitment. Employers understand that employees represent the company and their work influences client relationships. In dealing with employers' approaches to influence commitment, the analysis suggests that they have a clear perspective of what employee commitment is, although divergent results have emerged as compared to recent definition from the literature. Similar to the classic definition of commitment (Mowday 1979), the employers associate commitment with loyalty. Apart from strong emphasis on employee loyalty to the organisation, small CPS firms' employers also associate the term commitment to 'high quality'.

This research indicates that the firms' effort to manage knowledge workers' commitment is heavily focused on financial incentives. Other approaches used were identified as training, education and skill development opportunities; employee involvement in decision making/empowerment; open, honest, two-way communication; friendly and cooperative work environment; and flexibility.

The findings also indicate that constraints to provide job security and career advancement were seen as the biggest challenges in managing knowledge workers' commitment within small CPS firms, particularly in the current situation of economic downturn.

Given the importance placed on the topic by academics and small CPS firms' employers, the factors that might influence commitment from the knowledge workers' perspective is an issue worthy of deeper investigation. In addition, it would be appropriate to examine whether knowledge workers share similar meanings of commitment with their employers and also to gain better understanding on how knowledge workers express their commitment. Another avenue for further work would be the investigation of how individual knowledge workers' experience HR



practices and to what extent the strategies taken by the employers influence knowledge workers' commitment. In summary, further research would be appropriate which could take the form of a case study-based approach into organisations that sought to examine the content and state of the employment relationships and its influence on commitment from both the employer and knowledge workers' perspective.

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