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Title - Development Commitment: An Explorative Study

Author:

Anne Story
Principal Lecturer
Teesside Business School
University of Teesside
Borough Rd
Middlesbrough
TS1 3BA

Contact Details:

Anne.Story@tees.ac.uk
Tel. 01642 342899

For: The Doctoral Workshop

Contents:

- The title of the research
- The research problem, including theoretical issues, why the research is interesting and important
- Research Methodology - research strategy, design, method
- Key findings to date - these can be empirical and/or what's in the literature
- Problem areas (if any)
- What I intend to do next

Keywords:

HRD
Commitment
Development

The Research Problem

Essential to the success of the present government's plan to meet the challenges laid down by the Leitch Review, are the need for a 'partnership' between government, employers and individuals, and the resilience of their respective commitment to skills development. The government is keen to 'increase employers' commitment to training' and 'to ensure that people were more committed to develop their skills through their working lives'. However for several decades, under both voluntary and interventionist policies, the commitment of employers and employees have failed to produce the level of skills required to enable the UK to compete effectively in an increasingly global economy. Under the current Plan, whilst employers are encourage to commit through a financially induced pledge, the employees' commitment to development is assumed to flow from realising the links between getting economically valuable skills and getting good jobs. However given the inherent conflict in the employment relationship, the orthodoxy of mutuality which is core to the government's proposals, can be questioned both conceptually and empirically. It is unwise to assume that employees will automatically offer their commitment to their own development, in all circumstances. As the success of the government's strategy is dependent upon a 'partnership' between government, employers and individuals, and the resilience of their respective commitment to development, it is argued that a greater understanding of employee commitment to development has never been more crucial.

Commitment as a workplace phenomenon has a recent but explosive history in the human resource management literature, though commitment to development is a relatively new application of the concept. Commitment, defined as a force which binds an individual to a course of action, is now acknowledged to be a multi-dimensional and complex construct. Authors in this field have suggested that a three-component model of commitment, recognising the influence of the associated mindsets of desire, perceived cost, and obligation, may be generalizable to other domains. Meyer and Herscovitch's classic work on commitment (2001) advises that the target foci which can be entities or behaviours, but stresses that the target entity cannot be assumed by the observer. It is 'that to which the behavioural consequences of commitment are perceived by the actor to be relevant' (Meyer & Herscovitch 2001:310), a perspective consistent with Callinicos' theory of interests (1988), but not yet explored in the literature.

Furthermore the recognized 3-component model of associated commitment mindsets may not have relevance to a 'development' focus, the model having not been extended to this domain to date. Given the immaturity of the concept, it is the intention of this study to conduct exploratory research in development commitment, to seek to understand the phenomenon from the perspective of the participant.

The Contribution to Knowledge

The study will extend our understanding of the employee's commitment to their own development. It is intended that this understanding will provide the groundwork to enable future research to explore possible relationships, particularly between development commitment(s) and a range of possible antecedents and outcomes. However it may transpire that the inference of the study is that the phenomenon is not recommended for such forms of analysis. This possibility would be considered an

equally valuable conclusion in that it would redirect future research to more productive foci.

Research Methodology

Research Aim:

To explore the concept of a commitment to vocational development from the perspective of the employee. A secondary aim is to examine whether this concept is compatible with existing academic models depicting multiple bases of certain forms of commitment.

Research Objectives:

Pursuant to guidance from Miles and Huberman, the research questions are supplemented by 'sub questions, for clarity and specificity' (1994:25).

1. How do participants describe their attitude to their development?
    - Is 'development commitment' a concept which has meaning to the participating employee as a target entity?
    - Is commitment to development perceived to be a state with multiple component mindsets? If so, what components are identified? Are they compatible with existing academic models of multi-component commitment?
2. How do participants describe the strength of their commitment to development?
    - How is it manifest? examples,
    - Vocationally focused?
    - Enduring or contextual?
3. What do participating employees feel about the role of employers in directing or supporting their development?
    - How do they feel that this impacts on their attitude and/or behaviours?
4. How do they view the impact of their attitude on their development behaviours?
    - Do they make relative judgements about the level of commitment?
    - Have they experienced low motivation levels? If so, what led to the low motivation and how did they react?

The Epistemological Position.

Certain epistemological assumptions underpin the approach taken to address these questions and have informed the choice of methods of data collection and analysis. Epistemology, the theory of knowledge and the related underpinning philosophical position, is embedded in the theoretical perspective adopted in sociological (and management) research (Crotty, 1998). Although there are several positions discussed in the literature, two dichotomous perspectives exist: positivism, based on an objectivist framework; and interpretivism, based on constructionism. Positivists believe in that 'the social world exists externally and that its properties should be measured through objective methods' (Easterby-Smith et al 1991:22). Interpretivists disagree with this approach, proposing rather that we socially construct the world and

in so doing, give it meaning. Consequently they prefer to employ qualitative methods in their search of understanding and 'interpretation'. Purists from either faction argue that their respective underpinning assumptions about the nature of the world, are incompatible; often extending their argument to claim the superiority of one paradigm, and its associated methodology, over the other. This polarisation, most noticeable in the social and behavioural sciences literature, has become so divisive that 'accommodation between paradigms is impossible' (Guba, 1990:81) and mono-method studies are advocated (Smith and Hershusius, 1986).

However both paradigms have been criticised, especially in the context of the behavioural sciences. In contrast, my position is more 'pragmatic', believing that it is acceptable, indeed frequently desirable, to combine quantitative and qualitative methods in a single study. Pragmatists don't accept the 'Incompatibility Thesis' (Howe, 1992:254); or at least they may recognise the opposing perceptions of the nature of reality as incompatible but they do not accept the associated dichotomy between research methodologies. Rather they consider that a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods produces a more complete understanding (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004). Onwuegbuzie and Leech argue that utilising quantitative and qualitative techniques within the same study enables the pragmatic researcher 'armed with a bi-focal lens' to both identify, and posit explanations for, relationships in the data (2005:383).

The pragmatic researcher, rejecting the qualitative-quantitative divide, may prefer an alternative methodological typology with the potential to unite both quantitative and qualitative data collection methods and analytical techniques. Quantitative data can help compensate for lack of generalisability of the knowledge produced by qualitative methods. Further, a mixed methods research design provides capacity for 'across methods triangulation' (Jick, 1979:602) where the focus is constant (i.e. development commitment' but there are multiple methods of data collection employed. However this is not to suggest that triangulation is the core objective of mixed methods research. Contrary to this view, I lean towards the belief that divergent findings also have value in initiating a re-examination of the conceptual framework which has framed the study (Greene, Caracelli and Graham, 1989).

Cresswell presents a mixed methods framework with 3 categories: triangulation, exploratory and confirmatory (2002). Assessed against such a framework, the primary aim of this research is clearly exploratory, whilst the secondary aim, assessing the replicability of previous emergent themes (Onwuegbuzie & Leech 2005:383) is confirmatory. Though the 'theoretical drive' (Morse 2003:190) of the study is inductive, it will incorporate testing of the emergent theory deductively.

The Methods.

Ensuring the methods for investigation and analysis are consistent with the epistemological position and address the research aim and objectives have been the prime factors in determining the methods chosen for this study. However O'Leary suggests there are other factors to take into account including whether the methods are 'practical and doable' (2004:89) and 'ethical' (2004:93). She proposes the use of a checklist to develop the design of the study, which I found particularly helpful to clarify my thoughts and enable me to articulate them to others. Table 1 below is the seventh reiteration of the methodological design for the study.

Table 1. Methodological Design Table (based on guidance from O'Leary, 2004:97)

Questions	Detail	Comments
Who am I speaking about?	Employees engaged in vocational education development in England	
Who am I speaking to?	Part-time students who enrolled in vocational H.E. development.	Recognise other forms of vocational education exist, but focus is on those leading to qualification due to this emphasis in Leitch Review.
Where?	NE England.	No reason to suspect geographical variation, however caution in generalising. Doable due to ease of access.
When?	2009 February – June	Sample includes those who have withdrawn from programme as the commitment focus is 'development' in its broadest sense, not 'programme'.
How?	Developmental mixed methodology – using results from one method to inform the other method.	Implies the sequential use of methods.
	Individual exploratory semi-structured interviews with 15 respondents.	Focus group pilot was unwieldy and some evidence of peer pressure to conform to group norms.
	Questionnaire issue to whole population of part-time students engaged in programmes of vocational HE development.	Draft questions based on Meyer & Herscovitch model, but adapted following qualitative analysis of interviews.

The interview

As the primary aim of the research was to explore individual perceptions, an interview was chosen that would enable 'a rich understanding that may come from the few, rather than the many' (O'Leary, 2004:104). The interviews were semi-structured to enable new emergent themes to arise and to permit the respondents to discuss their attitude to development without feeling a pressure to conform to the expectations of the interviewer, at least initially. This enabled a fairly open dialogue to take place without any solicitation of a particular response.

Each interview, which was recorded, began with an explanation of the purpose of the study, the amount of time anticipated, the need for a recording, and the plan for using the results. The respondent was offered a written (consent) agreement guaranteeing anonymity, offering the opportunity to review the transcript, and a copy of the thesis abstract. After collecting some basic demographic and contact information, the initial interview questions were open, to settle the respondent into talking freely about their career.

The initial settling questions also sought to discover the respondent's view of their career stage and perception of job security. The discussion then progressed to discover the impetus for the current development activity, whether they or their

organisation initiated the activity and how they felt about this decision-making. This was then broadened out to explore the main research questions.

The interview sample.

The survey population are part-time students who enrolled on vocational programmes of Higher Education in the September of the 2008-9 academic year at Teesside Business School. It was considered important for the population to include those who had chosen to undertake development and those who had been 'encouraged' by their employer, in order to extend the range of possible attitudinal responses and avoid bias.

When selecting the sample for the interviews, there was no intention to narrow the focus of the research by the employment sector, or size of the employing organisation. Consequently students on programmes in the field of general management were selected to avoid a focus on any one sector or organisation, and all students on generic business and management part-time foundation degree programmes were contacted to enquire who would be willing to participate. At the time of sampling, the only factor known about each respondent's employer, was that there was one, as employment was a defining characteristic for all interview respondents. As the focus of commitment was development rather than 'programme', it was considered necessary to draw the sample from all students who were in the original cohort, as to select only from participants engaged in the programme in the following spring, could have introduced an unintended bias in the nature of responses. The intended sample size for the interviews was 15, but to date only 12 students have responded positively.

Key Findings to Date.

As the interviews are currently in progress, I have not yet begun the analysis. I hope to have some preliminary findings from the analysis of interview data to present to the workshop in June 2009.

What I Intend to do Next.

1. Analysis of interview data.

As the primary aim of this study is essentially explorative, the main analytical strategy is to disaggregate the interview data into categories rather than attempting at this early stage in concept development to discover links or relationships in the data (i.e. contextualising).

2. Finalise the design of the questionnaire.

The second phase of the research involves the use of quantitative methods to test the emerging concept of development commitment. A Likert scale will be developed with items adapted from the Meyer and Herscovitch (M&H) 'General Model of Commitment' depicting commitment as a sense of being bound e.g. obligated, compelled, inclined'(2001:319), but adapted to reflect the outcomes of the exploratory stage of the study. I have defined the base commitment concepts as:

Development commitment is defined as: an obliging force which binds the individual to the pursuit of their own development, even in the face of fluctuating attitudes (Story 2007).

Affective development commitment is defined here as: a sense of emotional attachment to one's individual development e.g. I am committed to my development because I experience emotion (pride/satisfaction/pleasure) from it.

Calculative development commitment is defined as: a sense of rational attachment to one's individual development e.g. I am committed to my development because it is likely to offer me significant benefits (career/ promotion/opportunities).

Normative development commitment is defined as: as sense of obligated attachment to one's individual development e.g. I am committed to my development because I my social group (organization/manager/family/partner) expect it of me.

All part-time business and management students (approximately will be included in the questionnaire survey (to be undertaken in June 2009).

This sequencing of the research methods is consistent with one form of Multi-Method design where 'while testing is the second quantitative component (and forms a deductive phase), the overall theoretical thrust is inductive' (Morse, 2003:202). According to Cresswell et al (2003:227), the primary focus of such a sequential exploratory design is 'to explore a phenomenon', 'expand on qualitative findings (p228), and is especially useful to test elements of an emerging theory, or in the development of new research instruments.

Problems.

I intend to expand the number of items for these concepts and then undertake a card sort with colleagues, the results of which will be analysed using Cronbach's alpha. The questionnaire will then include the most relevant newly determined items for development commitment, current established items for career commitment, and established career stage items.

The questionnaire data will be reliability tested using Cronbach's alpha, and then multi-dimensionality will be explored with exploratory factor analysis.

However I need confirmation of the appropriateness of these draft proposals for the analysis of the quantitative data prior to finalising the design of and issuing of the questionnaire.

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