
Organisational commitment implications for voluntary sport organisations

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ABSTRACT

The not-for profit sport sector is heavily reliant on volunteers for its functioning and ultimately its survival. Recent social and legal/policy changes are having a profound impact on volunteers' attitudes and behaviour. One vehicle for understanding the role of attitudes and behaviour in volunteer settings is the examination of organisational commitment. Committed individuals are believed to be more likely to remain in their organisations and to expend more effort on their behalf. This paper examines theory and research on organisational commitment with a specific focus on the implications of commitment to volunteer retention and performance. These implications are important for a sustainable volunteer management programs and the future of Australian sport.

INTRODUCTION

All sectors of not-for-profit organisations in Australia are under competing pressures to maintain and retain the large number of volunteers necessary for their functioning and survival. Simply, if the volunteers disappeared, so would the voluntary sector. Under current neo-liberal policies, cutbacks in government funding, and new regulations imposed, it has become more onerous to manage and operate in the third sector. Also, somewhat ironically, there are more paid staff working in this sector whereby issues between the above external factors interfere and influence the voluntary organisations, especially where paid staff and volunteers work side-by-side. This latter point is pertinent in the sport segment of the voluntary sector.

Australian sport and recreation clubs, organisations, and associations attract a significant percentage of volunteers, some 17% of the adult population (Lyons & Passey 2005, p. 24), and, although some organisations have paid staff working alongside volunteers, many community-based organisations are run entirely by volunteers. Further, reports from

recent surveys, such as *Giving Australia: Research on Philanthropy in Australia* (Lyons & Passey 2005) indicate that sport attracts one in five of all volunteer hours, the highest proportion of volunteer hours given (in comparison, religious institutions receive one in six, and education non-profit groups receive one in eight of volunteer hours). While sport attracts many volunteers who give many hours of time to their roles, the picture is both fraught and incomplete.

Despite these seemingly impressive figures, the above survey also suggests that, whilst volunteer numbers are generally increasing, there is a marked decline in the number of volunteer hours given to sporting organisations. Further, an analysis of trends conducted by Cuskelly (2004) shows that increasing levels of participation in organised sport are over-reaching the existing human resource capacity of many sport organisations, particularly at the grass-roots or community-based level, the basis and strength of a sport delivery system. Cuskelly suggests that there are three avenues to address this situation: make greater efforts to recruit new volunteers, increase the

number of hours volunteers currently give, or improve the retention of existing volunteers. Of these, retention is of high concern for long-term management (Hibbert, Piacentini & Al Dajani 2003). Clearly, attracting new volunteers is important, but not as significant if those already volunteering continue.

Sport organisations are facing other challenges and pressures stemming from the ever-changing nature of the sport sector and society in general (Nichols 2004). An increasing trend towards professionalisation together with societal changes, such as increased leisure choices and busier lifestyles, are leading to a demand for volunteers with specialist skills and knowledge. Altogether, these changes are having a profound effect on volunteers' attitudes and behaviour (Nichols, Taylor, James, Holmes, King & Garrett 2005).

One useful vehicle for an understanding of the role of attitudes and behaviours in volunteer settings is the examination of the nature of organisational commitment. The commitment of volunteers has been recognised as critical to the effective organisation and delivery of sport both in Australia and in other countries (Cuskelly, McIntyre & Boag 1998; Chelladurai 2006). Committed individuals are believed to be more likely to remain in their respective organisations and to participate wholeheartedly in organisational activities; thereby contributing to organisational goals and success. Therefore, the study of commitment is worthwhile in order to further understand what sport organisations can do to attract, retain and make enjoyable the roles volunteers fill in third sector organisations.

Research on organisational commitment has primarily focused on the situation of paid workers (Meyer & Allen 1997; Mowday, Porter & Steers 1982). The situation in the voluntary sector differs from that of paid workers mainly because volunteers do not receive nor are they dependent on financial rewards. Pearce (1993) suggests that this creates a situation of uncertainty, where social expectations and organisational values are less defined than they are for the remunerated worker. This allows volunteers a degree of individual independence and freedom, where their attitudes should have a greater influence on actions such as staying or leaving the organisation. This provides further reason for a closer examination of organisational commitment in volunteer settings.

The purpose of this paper is to discuss and analyse the role organisational commitment plays in volunteer outcomes such as performance and retention. It outlines the main commitment frameworks with particular reference to application to the nature of sport volunteer work. It then addresses empirical research (in paid and volunteer settings). Finally, research and practical suggestions are presented.

DEFINITIONS AND FRAMEWORKS

Although organisational commitment has received considerable attention in a variety of workplace settings (Meyer & Allen 1997), a consensus regarding its nature has not yet been reached. This notwithstanding, it is generally agreed that commitment has a core essence that distinguishes it from other work-related constructs (Meyer & Herscovitch 2001). Early conceptualisations such as Kelman's (1958), Etzioni's (1961) and Kanter's (1968) derive from organisational and sociological theories that attempt to explain involvement in social organisations (Cuskelly & Boag 2001). These provide an insight into the nature of the linkages between the individual and the organisation.

Kelman (1958) argues that three different processes – compliance, identification, and internalisation – guide an individual's behaviour. These processes may lead to the same behaviour, which in the case of volunteering could be deciding to become one or to continue to be one. For example, Cuskelly et al. (1998) suggest that an individual may decide to volunteer as a sport administrator on the expectation of gaining approval from others on the board or committee (compliance), but continue to volunteer because of the development of a sense of identification with other board members.

In a similar vein, Kanter (1968) proposes three interrelated dimensions that operate to increase the individual's ties to the organisation: continuance, cohesion, and control commitments. Continuance commitment occurs when individuals make personal sacrifices to join or continue with an organisation. Upon deciding to join the committee of a sport club, for example, an individual is aware that that time will need to be invested to the fulfilment of that role, leaving less time for other (leisure) pursuits. Cohesion commitment denotes an attachment to social

relationships in an organisation. Organisations such as sport clubs frequently foster member cohesion by offering incentives such as club uniforms or orientation days, efforts that are aimed at increasing this type of commitment (Mowday et al. 1982). Control commitment is the attachment to the norms of the organisation that shape behaviour in the desired directions. This commitment exists when volunteers act in ways that are believed to be 'in the best interests of the organisation' and that which an organisation would approve.

Finally, Etzioni (1961) argues that organisations exert control over their members and that this control depends on the nature of the individual's involvement with the organisation. This involvement can be of low or high intensity and of positive or negative nature. Etzioni refers to this positive involvement as 'commitment' and to negative involvement as 'alienation'. Moral involvement is one of such positive attachments and, according to Etzioni, it is based on the internalisation of the organisation's goals, values and norms, through which identification with authority are developed (Mowday et al. 1982). This conceptualisation is particularly applicable to voluntary organisations where the appeal of organisational values and congruence of these values with the individuals' can be central to the volunteers' motivation.

Whereas Etzioni's (1961) categories denote organisational influences that may operate under different circumstances, Kanter's three dimensions are highly interrelated, operating at the same time to reinforce ties with the organisation (Mowday et al. 1982).

A significant theoretical development was the distinction made between attitudinal and behavioural commitment (Mowday et al. 1982). The former is an attachment that individuals have for their organisation, which involves three factors central to the definition they proposed: (1.) a strong belief in and acceptance of organisational 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.

In contrast, behavioural commitment is defined as a force tying the individual to a particular organisation. This approach derives from the work of Becker (1960) who believes that commitment rested on the perceived importance of the costs

associated with discontinuing a line of activity, such as employment or organisational membership. Mowday et al. (1982) point out that once the commitments are made, an individual must find mechanisms of adjustment to such commitments, thus creating a self-reinforcing cycle. The individual becomes committed to a particular course of action. An attitude may develop as a consequence of the commitment to the course of action (Meyer & Allen 1997).

In recognition that commitment is a complex construct, Meyer and Allen (1997) conceptualised commitment as a psychological state whilst at the same time they acknowledge that this state can develop retrospectively as a justification for a course of action (cf. Festinger 1957). In proposing their own definition and analysing various definitions and conceptualisations, these authors acknowledged commonalities and differences. The key similarity is that commitment has a *core essence* that distinguishes it from other workplace-related attitudes or motivation. The key differences appear to centre on the nature or origin of commitment. In formulating their model, Meyer and Allen sought to reconcile these matters by identifying the common themes (commitment is a *mind-set* – a psychological state that binds an individual to an organisation) and diversity of the origin of that mind-set (which they called affective, continuance or normative mind-sets). Individuals are assumed to differ in the strength of the presence of the various commitments. The combination of the three represents an individual's organisational commitment profile.

An affective commitment, which reflects an individual's emotional attachment to and identification with the organisation, comprises the first dimension. This individual *wants* to remain in the organisation. The continuance commitment reflects an individual's decision to remain with the organisation because of the costs associated with leaving it. This individual *needs* to remain in the organisation. And the normative commitment reflects an individual's feeling that he or she should remain with the organisation because of a sense of duty or obligation. This individual feels he or she *ought* to remain with the organisation. Research examining the model has been extensive, generally supporting the various dimensions described and is documented in several reviews including Mathieu and Zajac (1990), Meyer

and Allen (1997), and Meyer, Stanley, Herscovitch and Topolnytsky (2002).

The underlying assumptions of Mowday et al.'s (1982) and Meyer and Allen's (1997) models can be compared and contrasted as well as linked to the earlier theories discussed. According to Cuskelly (1995), Mowday et al. posit that attitudinal and behavioural aspects act reciprocally, whilst Meyer and Allen contend that the dimensions develop simultaneously though independently of one another. The similarity of the two models lies in the overlap between Mowday et al.'s conceptualisation (and measures) and Meyer and Allen's affective dimension. Kelman's (1958) compliance process can be likened to Etzioni's (1961) calculative low intensity involvement and is integrated into Meyer and Allen's continuance commitment. Conversely, Etzioni's moral involvement, Kelman's internalisation process, and Kanter's (1968) cohesion and control commitment are more akin to Meyer and Allen's affective commitment. Etzioni's moral involvement also shares similarities with Meyer and Allen's normative commitment.

In sum, it is now generally accepted that organisational commitment is multidimensional in nature. In volunteer settings, however, affective or normative (attitudinal) dimensions may be more appropriate or have greater relevance as volunteers are not dependent on financial rewards and have greater behavioural freedom within their organisations than paid workers.

MULTIPLE COMMITMENT TARGETS

Definitions, theories and research on commitment have typically focused on the attachments or identification that an individual has for his or her organisation as a whole. However, this emphasis on the 'whole organisation' has raised some concerns amongst theorists who believe that individuals can develop commitments to other organisational targets or entities (Cohen 2003; Morrow 1993; Reichers 1985). These targets can be managers, occupations/roles, or work teams within the organisation. Each of these elements can have its own goals and values (Meyer & Allen 1997), which may not always be compatible with those of the organisation itself.

Cohen (2003) strongly argues that the studies of multiple workplace commitments are of extreme

importance, not only for theoretical but for practical reasons as individuals in organisations are exposed to more than one target at one time. This approach has advantages over the commonly used 'global' approach to organisational commitment in that it addresses the question of what the employee/volunteer is attached to and how this attachment affects behaviour. Furthermore, it allows the distinction amongst individuals, who, although seemingly equally committed to the organisation as a whole, may hold different commitments to individual targets or constituents. In essence, the targets of commitment can be diverse.

For the multiple commitment framework to be useful both from theoretical and applied viewpoints the commitment targets have to be psychologically distinct to individuals. In this respect, several studies have found that individuals distinguish between commitment to the organisation and commitment to various targets. Targets studied with paid-worker samples include supervisors/leaders (Vandenberghe, Bentein & Stinglhamber 2004); the work group or team (Baruch & Winkelmann-Gleed 2002; Vandenberghe et al. 2004), occupational professional commitment (Baruch & Winkelmann-Gleed 2002; Meyer, Allen & Smith 1993), and job involvement (Blau & Boal 1989).

Despite the recent increase in multiple commitment targets research, limited work has been conducted with volunteer samples. One exception is a recent study by Engelberg, Skinner and Zakus (2006). Using Meyer and Herscovitch's (2001) commitment framework, these authors examined the commitment of volunteers in Little Athletics centres to three organisational targets: the organisation as a whole (the centre), the team of volunteers, and the volunteer role undertaken. They found that volunteers had distinctive commitments to these three targets (where commitment to the team was the strongest, followed by organisational commitment, then commitment to the role). Commitment to the team of volunteers is similar to work group commitment in paid-settings in that teams often develop an identity or goals of their own. The concept of role commitment may share similarities with Grube and Piliavin's (2000) role identity. Role identity is conceptualised as a state in which a particular role becomes so important that the role comes to dominate the sense of self. In a study of

retention and performance of American Cancer Society volunteers, Grube and Piliavin (2000) found that role identity was the most important factor in the prediction of amount of time given to and intent to leave the organisation. Furthermore, role identity was a better predictor of outcomes including intention to leave the organisation.

Other targets of interest to volunteer-staffed contexts may be the association to which the club or centre belongs (e.g. the governing sport body), the act of volunteering itself, the athletes and the community. To date, research into the sport volunteer context have not made this distinction or had this focus, but as Engelberg et al.'s (2006) study suggests, this line of research may be warranted, particularly if commitment targets are better predictors of key outcomes than organisational commitment alone.

Can theory and research into commitment dimensionality and commitment targets be integrated? It appears that this is the case. Meyer and Herscovitch (2001) drew from Meyer and Allen's (1997) three-component model to develop their general model of workplace commitments by stating that an individual become committed to a workplace target because of a feeling of 'desire' (affective commitment), a feeling of 'need' (continuance commitment), and/or a 'sense of obligation' (normative commitment). This model is based on the premise that our understanding of organisational behaviour will be enhanced if the conceptualisation of the construct remains constant across contexts. This premise appears promising not only for future work on the commitment of paid workers but also particularly for the study of volunteer commitment where the volume of theory based work has been limited. An examination of the specific issues relating to the volunteer experience may shed light on whether all three of the proposed dimensions should be retained and, in addition, what targets of commitment are central to the volunteer experience.

RESEARCH ON COMMITMENT OUTCOMES

Empirical research on the impact of organisational commitment has focused on turnover, turnover intentions, performance, and performance-related variables (including attendance, organisational citizenship behaviour, and job performance).

Although many of these links are moderated by situational factors (e.g. working conditions, available resources) the implications seem clear: affectively committed individuals, paid or unpaid, are more valuable workers.

There are, however, some important dissimilarities between both types of workers. One of these dissimilarities centres on the complex nature of volunteers' organisational involvement. Pearce (1993) highlights the complexity of volunteer commitment:

...volunteers' commitment to their organisations is a reflection of the complexity of their organisational experiences. Volunteers usually are assumed to be very committed, since they are not compelled to work by financial need as are most employees. That is, in the absence of compelling external explanations, society, as well as volunteers, attributes high levels of commitment to organisational volunteers. (p. 93)

Despite this premise, commitment to the organisation cannot be assumed to be high for all volunteers (Pearce 1993). Drawing on Knoke and Prensky (1984), Pearce notes that volunteers may be strongly committed to the goals of the organisation but have weaker ties to the institution itself. For example, parents who volunteer for a junior sport club because they want to help their own children might find alternative ways of helping, such as taking them to training sessions. In multiple commitment terms, volunteers may develop commitments other than that to the organisation itself.

The relationship between organisation commitment and sport volunteer turnover is one area that has received some attention, presumably because volunteer retention is one of the main concerns in sport organisations (Cuskelly & Boag 2001; Cuskelly 2004). Cuskelly and Boag conducted a longitudinal study where they assessed the organisational commitment of volunteer committee members of sport clubs at several points during a sports season, as well as perceived committee functioning, to predict volunteer turnover. The strength of this study was that it employed a longitudinal design to better understand causal effects, which took advantage of the clear time frames that sports seasons provide. The authors found that organisational commitment was a predictor of

turnover and that there was a temporal relationship indicating that commitment measured close to when turnover occurred was a stronger predictor.

Cuskelly and Boag (2001) conclude that, consistent with findings of research in paid settings, organisational commitment has utility as an explanatory construct in turnover behaviour of sports volunteers. Despite this, the authors caution that whilst organisational commitment is a predictor of turnover, it accounted for a relatively small proportion of turnover behaviour. As has been noted earlier, volunteers are normally not bound by the same constraints that tie employees to their organisations and situational aspects may predict volunteer turnover better than attitudinal aspects. For example, a parent may decide to volunteer to help his or her child through their training season but decide to leave once it is over, or leave because of other competing obligations. It is not unusual to find that women, in particular, facilitate the sport participation of their children as part of their regular childcare duties (Thompson 1999).

Other possible consequences of organisational commitment have received less attention. Volunteers' work is usually undertaken during free, discretionary time (e.g. compiling a club newsletter at home). Issues such as absenteeism and performance are not regularly monitored or measured in a consistent fashion. Regardless of commitment levels, if an individual experiences competing obligations, such as work obligations, these will have to take precedence over volunteer work.

Despite this, volunteer performance is increasingly becoming central to the effective management of sport organisations. The volunteer literature emphasises the importance of volunteer performance (Paull 1998, 2000) not only because volunteers are accountable for the services they provide, but also given the current stringent legal requirements discussed earlier. In particular, volunteer board performance in non-profit sporting and other organisations has come under scrutiny and has been the subject of recent research (Hoye & Auld 2001; Preston & Brown 2004).

Although the link between organisational commitment and performance in paid settings has not generally been found to be strong (Ricketta 2002) it has nevertheless been recognised that even a modest increase in performance could translate into

significant benefits for the organisation. Two recent studies assessed the impact of organisational commitment and performance of volunteers in non-profit organisations. In a study of board members of 38 social service organisations, Preston and Brown (2004) found that affective organisational commitment was strongly related to three measures of job performance. The relations with normative commitment were also significant but weaker.

Similarly, Stephens, Dawley and Stephens (2004) conducted a study of board directors of chambers of commerce and examined the relation between directors' commitment to the board and self-reported measures of performance. Affective commitment was significantly related to self-reported performance, followed by normative commitment. Continuance commitment was unrelated to performance. Together, these findings reveal a similar pattern to that of paid-employee studies and suggest that the examination of the commitment-performance relation is a fruitful avenue for research. These indicators of performance have to be appropriate to the volunteer situation. Several indicators of performance may need to be included in future research (Stephens et al. 2004). As Pearce (1993) points out 'effort' in its traditional meaning is not applicable to the volunteer setting.

The organisation's message about what is desirable or expected may moderate the link between commitment and extra-role behaviour (Meyer & Allen 1997). A study by Schaubroeck and Ganster (1991) looked at the willingness to engage in extra-role behaviours of volunteers in two types of organisation: service and non-service. The authors found a relationship between the volunteers' affective commitment and their willingness to perform this behaviour (a fundraiser) was moderated by the type of organisation. In service organisations, affective commitment and participation were positively related; in non-service organisations the variables were unrelated. These findings have interesting implications for the study of organisational commitment and organisational commitment behaviour in sport organisations. For example, volunteers may appraise the aims of the organisations they serve when deciding whether to engage in extra-role behaviours.

In short, research on the consequences of volunteer commitment has been limited. Most of this

research focused on the issue of retention/turnover, particularly in sport organisations. Although some links between organisational commitment and subsequent turnover were found (e.g. Cuskelly & Boag 2001), volunteers are not normally bound by the same constraints as paid workers (Pearce 1993), and therefore situational aspects, such as having to move to another area or an increase in other working obligations, may predict volunteer turnover better than attitudinal factors, like organisational commitment. As previously noted, some work has been conducted on the organisational commitment–performance link, particularly volunteer board member performance (e.g. Preston & Brown 2004), however, this generally showed similar results to that of research in paid-employee settings.

RESEARCH IMPLICATIONS

Research on the impact of the organisational commitment of volunteers has been guided by the same concerns as that conducted on paid-employee settings. In contrast, however, research on volunteer populations has been limited. Although the findings on the whole mirror those of the commitment of paid workers, more research needs to be conducted to better understand the issues that are peculiar to volunteer settings, including community-based sport organisations.

The area of the dimensionality of the commitment of volunteers remains largely unexplored. The preponderance of volunteer commitment research has utilised Mowday et al.'s (1982) conceptualisation and measures (which are primarily affective) and which have been subject to harsh criticism (Benkhoff 1997). However, recent studies in sporting and other non-profit organisations (e.g. Dawley, Stephens & Stephens 2005; Engelberg et al. 2006; Preston & Brown 2004) have shown that volunteers may hold continuance and normative commitments to their organisations. These findings may have important implications for volunteer commitment theory and for the prediction of outcomes of interest, such as retention and performance.

The area of the commitment of volunteers to multiple organisational targets also remains unexplored with the exception of Engelberg et al.'s (2006) work. As stated earlier, there are various organisational targets to which volunteers can be committed.

Identifying and assessing suitable targets of commitment would add to the understanding of the commitment of volunteers in the same way it has helped understand the complexities of commitment in paid-worker settings. Meyer and Herscovitch's (2001) general model of commitment provides a useful framework for this research endeavour.

CONCLUSION

It is important to note that research on volunteer commitment can assist sport organisations on a practical level. For example, it can educate volunteer coordinators about the importance of considering key organisational aims as precisely as possible (e.g. retention in the club, retention in a particular role, team performance and so forth) and then to match these aims to the actions required to achieve them. It may be necessary, depending on the case, for volunteer coordinators to focus their efforts on increasing (or decreasing) commitment to the organisation as a whole, or to specific targets (such as the work team or the role). A club with a dearth of coaches may enhance coaches' commitment to the coaching role by providing incentives for coaches to continue (e.g. encouraging cohesiveness amongst coaches may promote affective commitment, whilst focusing on the need to have coaches for the future generation of players may promote normative commitment).

An understanding of the nature of commitment also provides guidelines concerning the development of policies to achieve desired outcomes. In this respect, if the wrong type of commitment is fostered (for example, increasing continuance commitment by providing rewards), organisational performance may decline as volunteers only exert effort conditional upon further rewards. The above are some of the potential implications that volunteer managers in sport organisations can consider in their efforts to develop and retain volunteers. This information permits a more focused volunteer management program, with achievable key outcomes, thereby ensuring the continuance of sport and sport events in Australia.

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