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STRATEGIC HUMAN RESOURCES MANAGEMENT IS IRRELEVANT WHEN IT COMES TO HIGHLY SKILLED PROFESSIONALS IN THE NEW ECONOMY

Stéphanie Chasserio, Professor, ESC Lille

Marie-Josée Legault, Full Professor, Labor Relations,Téluq

ABSTRACT

The goal of this paper is to explain the commitment behaviour of highly skilled professionals in Canadian business-to-business (B2B) technology services companies that do not have a formal and explicit managerial commitment strategy and to emphasize the need to take the organizational context into consideration when developing a theory that seeks to account for differences in employee's organisational commitment. Our contribution is to reappraise the relevance of the traditional organizational commitment definition in this organizational context, a new organizational form. We demonstrate that in the companies which are different from the traditional bureaucratic organizational forms and which employ highly qualified professionals, the employment relationship is based on a psychological contract that is not accounted for in the strategic HRM theory.

Indeed, the basic principles of strategic HRM dictate that an organization's most valuable asset is its employees; it is therefore incumbent on management to do whatever is necessary to retain its workforce, readily described as a key resource and to use human resources management (HRM) practices as tools to elicit commitment. In a study of highly skilled workers in Canadian business-to-business (B2B) technology services companies belonging to the so-called "new economy," we observed that although the competitive advantage enjoyed by these companies depends to a large degree on the creativity and innovativeness of their workforce, these companies barely have any official HRM policies, and the HR department plays a very unobtrusive role. Yet, no one could say that the employees in these firms are not committed —

on the contrary! This situation has several implications in terms of career for these professionals, in terms of HR practices for the employers.

Nevertheless, until now, existing theoretical models of organizational commitment have shown little interest in highly skilled workers in general and even less in new economy professionals.

KEY WORDS

Business-to-business (B2B) technology services companies, Highly skilled professionals, Informal management, New economy, Organizational commitment, Strategic HRM theory.

INTRODUCTION

The basic principles of strategic human resources management dictate that an organization's most valuable asset is its employees; it is therefore incumbent on management to do whatever is necessary to retain its workforce, readily described as a key resource (Becker & Gerhart, 1996; Pfeffer & Veiga, 1999). Human resources management (HRM) practices are among the tools used to elicit commitment with a view to achievement of company objectives. The results of considerable research on the effects of these practices on organizational performance in the manufacturing (Arthur, 1994; MacDuffie, 1995), public (Gould-Williams, 2003; Harrisson, Laplante, & Bellemare, 2005), and information technology (IT) services (Castells, 2001: 91; Paré, Tremblay, & Lalonde, 2001a, 2001b; Scholarios & Marks, 2004) sectors reveal that employers who invest in effective practices and policies to foster commitment have workforces that are willing to put in more effort, "give more," exceed the stated requirements of the employment contract (Tremblay & Simard, 2005a), and improve the overall performance of the organization.

In a study of highly skilled workers at Canadian business-to-business (B2B) technology services companies belonging to the so-called "new economy,"[1] we observed employers' HRM practices. The competitive advantage enjoyed by these companies depends to a large degree on the creativity and innovativeness of their workforces. Nevertheless, until now, existing theoretical models of organizational commitment based on a traditional conception of organizations have shown relatively little interest in highly skilled workers in general and even less in new economy professionals. Not that no scholars have shown interest in these professionals, actually, but vary few among them focused on organizational commitment per se. Most of those studies have focused on industrial companies or large bureaucracies (Appelbaum & Batt, 1994; Arthur, 1994; MacDuffie, 1995; Pfeffer, 1995; Pfeffer & Veiga, 1999; Simard & Lapalme, 2003) in which employees hold subordinate positions and have little autonomy within the hierarchical organization, and work procedures are very detailed and prescriptive in order to establish and enforce standards.

The B2B technology services companies that we investigated turned out to be very different. They are operating in an extremely competitive global environment; their organizational structure is relatively flat and has few formal procedures, and the management style is very informal. The highly skilled professionals hired by these companies enjoy great autonomy in their work owing to their advanced, relatively esoteric knowledge. Unlike industrial companies or large bureaucracies, these firms have virtually no official human resources management policies, and the HR department plays a very unobtrusive role (Autier & Picq, 2003; Perrons, 2002; Pina e Cunha, 2002). Yet no one could say that the employees in these firms are not committed — on the contrary!

The goal of this paper is to explain the commitment behavior of highly skilled workers in business-to-business (B2B) technology services companies without a managerial commitment strategy and to emphasize the need to take the organizational context into consideration when developing a theory that seeks to account for differences in employee commitment. Our contribution is to reappraise the relevance of the traditional organizational commitment definition in a specific organizational context, B2B technology services companies, a new organizational form. We demonstrate that in the companies which are different from the traditional bureaucratic organizational forms and which employ highly qualified professionals the employment relationship is based on a different psychological contract. This situation has several implications in terms of career for these professionals, in terms of human resource practices for the employers.

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ORGANIZATIONAL COMMITMENT: A CHANGING CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Development of the Concept of Organizational Commitment

Mowday, Steers, and Porter's definition of organizational commitment (1979), accepted for some 30 years (Guest, 1992), associated three characteristics with a committed employee:

(a) a strong belief in and an acceptance of the organization's goals and values,
(b) a willingness to exert considerable effort on behalf of the organization, and
(c) a strong desire to maintain membership in the organization.

More recently, Meyer and Allen (1991) sought to refine the theory by presenting a multidimensional definition that distinguishes three different types of commitment: affective commitment, which goes back to aspects of the definition given by Mowday, Steers, and Porter (1979); continuance commitment, in which employees remain in their jobs because they have acquired more advantages than they could get elsewhere in the labor market; and, lastly, normative commitment, in which employees' sense of duty keeps them in their current jobs. Affective commitment is the kind that gives rise to commitment behavior (Meyer & Allen, 1991; Paillé, 2004; Tremblay, Guay, & Simard, 2000; Tremblay & Simard, 2005a). The last two forms of commitment have nothing to do with the professionals we observed. In this paper, we don't refer to the normative commitment, because our data don't allow us to establish this form of commitment among our sample; just the opposite, in fact, as the turnover level and moving intentions are very high. Our respondents have 4.4 years of employment on average in their present job and 12.2 years of experience in their field (Legault, 2004). Concerning the continuance commitment, we refer to it to a some extent later in our paper when we will talk about the question of salary and financial incentives, but however we will examine professionals' stability of employment as part of affective commitment (element c of Mowday, Steers and Porter's definition, above). Our reflection will be more concentrated on the question of the affective commitment; would it be accurate to say that these highly qualified professionals are affectively committed to their organization? The above definition of affective commitment to the company does not seem to apply in the context of the B2B companies (Cappelli, 1999; Guest, 1997, 1998; Singh & Vinnicombe, 2000; Stewart, 1999). Long-term loyalty to an employer becomes less important, while factors related to an employee's current contribution to the organization take on more importance. These professionals see themselves much more as independent entrepreneurs than as employees (Alvesson, 2000; Barley & Kunda, 2004); for them, the concepts of loyalty and attachment to an organization have become obsolete.

Questioning Stability and Loyalty

Far-reaching changes in work and HRM practices or policies in general (in the overall economy) prompt questions about the universality of the Mowday, Steers, and Porter's strategic framework aimed at eliciting stability in employment. Organizational loyalty is more and more cast into question, as can be seen from more recent research (Baruch, 2001, 1998; DeFillippi, 2003; Ghoshal, Bartlett, & Moran, 1999; Maguire, 2002; Sims, 1994), especially among highly skilled workers (Singh & Vinnicombe, 2000). The psychological contract — a tacit agreement between the parties consisting of promised exchanges and reciprocal obligations (Atkinson, 2002; Cappelli, 1999: 18-22; McFarlane, Shore, & Tetrick, 1994; Maguire, 2002) — had long been linked to the Fordist compromise, especially in the manufacturing sector, but also in the hiring process of IT professionals in big bureaucratic organizations. Essentially, the Fordist compromise was part of a mode of economic regulation that took place between 1950 and 1980. It consisted mainly in a way of organising work that basically can be summed up to a trade-off of employment and income security for a strict managerial control of work, a loss of autonomy and a general deskilling of work (Bélanger, Giles & Murray, 2002: 20-30).

But with the opening of markets, global competition, and the transformation of demand, employers have been seeking to increase the flexibility of their:

– Organizational structure by flattening their hierarchy in order to adopt a faster, more efficient decision-making process;
– Supply by abandoning standardized mass production in favor of products that meet the needs of their customers more closely;
– Work organization by adopting matrix organizational forms, such as management by project;
– Workforce by developing forms of employment those make it possible to vary workforce numbers in line with demand and to cut costs.

Placing more emphasis on flexibility in this way raises doubts about the relevance of the Fordist compromise and particularly job security for IT professionals in the "New Economy" (Carnoy, 2000: 56-104; Périlleux, 2001: 33-35; Rousseau & Greller, 1994). More and more companies are seeking flexibility (Linhart, 2004) and demanding greater availability, productivity, and effort in the present, without necessarily offering anything in exchange and this actually results in increased uncertainty. This phenomenon is surely obvious in the so-called "New Economy", but while a large number of manufacturing companies are still operating according to the Fordist model (Milkman, 1998), the organizational changes noted in new economy businesses are exerting a strong pull on other sectors (DeFillippi, 2003; Giles, Murray & Bélanger, 2002; Godard, 2001; Linhart, 2004; Périlleux, 2001).

That phenomenon is often referred to, in the United Kingdom and the United States, as the post-bureaucratic or post-Taylorist organization (Ashkenas et al., 1995; Castells, 1996; Galbraith, 1993; Palmer and Dunford, 1997; Powell, 1990; Quinn, Anderson et Finkelstein, 1996; Snow, Miles et Coleman, 1992; Volberda, 1998), that is to say a set of principles that form an alternative model of business and workforce management that, it is claimed, renews and transforms the model of the bureaucratic organization, which belongs to an industrial age in decline. This new model is being implemented at various levels in many different sectors, and not only in the new economy, of course. But there is no better laboratory than the new economy to observe the prototype of this alternative model at its best, in part because virtually all of its activities are run according to the management-by-project mode of organization.[2] This is not surprising, as management by project is one of the organizational innovations specific to the liberal or post-bureaucratic organization (Courpasson, 2000, p. 187) that provides a means of implementing the model's salient features: disappearance or flattening of the command and control hierarchies; assigning greater responsibility to so-called autonomous workers, especially when they are highly skilled and what is sought, at least in part, is innovation; questioning of the Fordist compromise; a high level of work flexibility; and disappearance of job security, of rigid salary structures, of stable or predictable work schedules, etc. (Giles, Murray et Bélanger, 2002; Godard, 2001).

[2] We have adopted the following definitions: "project management" is the term used in industries where production naturally lends itself to organization into projects, that is, the successive production of deliverable objects at a given price and according to a given schedule (in the construction industry, for instance), whereas "management by project" is used in sectors of the economy that have recently "switched over" to this form of management, with companies adopting the processes (teams with determined durations and changing membership, a certain degree of autonomy in organizing tasks and assuming responsibility for the achievement of specific objectives) even though their production does not inherently require these actual characteristics. Logically, the term "management by project" can encompass both types, and the scope of the term "project management" is limited to sectors where the organization of work into projects is inherent in production or demand.

Eliciting Commitment from Highly Skilled Professionals

The extensive research that has been done on industrial companies and bureaucracies (Appelbaum & Batt, 1994; Arthur, 1994; Huselid, 1995; MacDuffie, 1995; Pfeffer, 1995; Pfeffer & Veiga, 1999; Simard, Doucet, & Bernard, 2005: 298; Tremblay, Guay, & Simard, 2000) has revealed a number of HRM practices or policies that elicit commitment behavior: compensation and recognition, training, skills development and career management, quality of life in the workplace, teamwork, staff selection and sharing of information. According to these studies, these HRM practices contribute to build a high performance work system through eliciting commitment of salaries. We should underline an important point: The main objective of these researches is to link up HRM practices and organizational performance, but most often they are not specific about the type of employees (employee, manager or professional) as an important factor in their model. Moreover, at this time we have not found any study which compare the effect of HRM practices on different populations, manual workers and highly qualified professionals for instance (Carrière & Barrette, 2005).

That's why we will restrict our examination to official or unofficial practices or policies to elicit commitment that have been studied among highly skilled workers and managers population. The HRM policies that we have chosen were the most recurrent in the studies.

- Skills development, continuous training, and career opportunities are all indications to employees that the employer is serious about establishing a long-term relationship (Cappelli, 2004);
- Monetary recognition, compensation, and financial incentives do not have uncontested effects, but studies of skilled workers underscore the importance of salary to them (Yeuk-Mui May, Korczynski, & Frenkel, 2002). Nonmonetary rewards (positive feedback from immediate superior, nomination for employee of the month, rewards in the form of show tickets or gift cards, etc.) seem to have a positive effect (Tremblay, Guay, & Simard, 2000).
- Quality of life in the workplace, we particularly focus on implementation of policies that help employees meet family obligations (time management, family-related leave, flexible working hours, on-site daycare) (Chiu & Ng, 1999; Grover & Crooker, 1995; Osterman, 1995; Paré, Tremblay, & Lalonde, 2001a, 2001b; Scandura & Lankau, 1997; Scholarios & Marks, 2004). These policies are a major way to improve the quality of life in the workplace.

Though teamwork is an intrinsic part of management by project as a way of organising work, we will not consider the question of teamwork as a HRM practice because teamwork has not been implemented as an innovation or a policy in a place where people used to work individually; it is considered as the one and only way to work in IT specialised services, as they manage one-off projects. We will consider teamwork as part and parcel of this particular organization of work and present it later in the article.

Conducive Environment

According to research findings, these practices or policies elicit employee commitment by creating trust (Gould-Williams, 2003) and the perception of organizational fairness (Paré, Tremblay, & Lalonde, 2001b: 12; Tremblay, Chênevert, Simard, Lapalme, & Doucet, 2005), which in turn promote the establishment of a sustainable relationship (Paré, Tremblay, & Lalonde, 2001a; Simard, Doucet, & Bernard, 2005). The employee will consider positively the HRM policies which are available in his organization. For him, it’s a significant signal he gets from his employer, meaning he is an important part of the organization. The perceived organizational support creates among employees a desire to give in return (Guzzo & Noonan, 1994; Whitener, 2001), in accordance with social exchange theory (Blau, 1964) and the norm of reciprocity (Gouldner, 1960). The manager creates an obligation of reciprocity with the employee (Gouldner, 1960), for whom affective commitment and individual motivation represent the counterpart of an environment and working conditions that meet his or her aspirations. This general model accurately represents the dominant contemporary trend in management training and consulting in North America. It replaces the preceding model of work commitment by providing a more complex picture of reality.

These studies presuppose a strategic framework in which human resources are regarded as a competitive advantage that must be preserved (Pfeffer & Veiga, 1999; Becker & Huselid, 1999) because “the possibility of fostering commitment behavior among employees improves the organization’s ability to adapt to change and increases its capacity to react” (Tremblay & Wils, 2005: 47). But does this same reasoning apply in the specific context of B2B technology services companies?

METHOD

Our Sample

In this study, we investigated seven Canadian companies based in Montreal which employ high qualified people. Five of them are small loosely structured B2B technology services companies acting in multimedia, information technology (IT) business services and optics-photonics; they are the core sample. Two big bureaucracies stand as the comparative sample (corporate real-estate management services and insurance) in which we interviewed professionals from the IT department. We have chosen them in order to compare conditions relating to the same professions in different organizational contexts. Our objective here is to study if people, men and women, exercising the same profession but in different organizational contexts negotiated their arrangements to balance work and private life under the same conditions.

We conducted 88 extensive individual interviews with women and men in the same positions: Managers, Computer Analysts, Programmer-Analysts, Project Managers, Systems Analysts, Systems Architects, Testing engineers, Software Designers, Optical Engineers, Process Engineers, Operating Engineers, Optics-Photonics Researchers and IT Engineers. The data were collected between January 2001 and April 2002.

In each company, we interviewed the Human Resources (HR) manager, one or two supervisors and ten to twelve employees, equal numbers of women (45) and men (43). In our sample of 88 respondents, the average age for men and women was around 35 years old. A proportion of 59.5% of our respondents had a university degree and 26% had a college degree. The average income was around 60 957$ CAD, these high qualified people are very well paid compared to people in the traditional economy with same degree (between 50 and 100 % extra).

Our Method

Professionals were chosen randomly among the lists of professionals provided by the Human resources departments or by the upper management. The semi structured interviews lasted one and a quarter to two and a half hours. They were held in closed offices at their workplaces, and everyone interviewed received a guarantee of anonymity and confidentiality signed by the research team members that quoted their commitment to the *Commission d'accès à l'information* [Quebec Access to Information Commission].

We asked people about their job contents and job requirements, the rules of advancement, human resources management practices, especially as for balancing private life and work, and about their problems, strategies and professional decisions in this regard. We analyzed the interview content with the NVIVO software.

OUR RESULTS

The End of Loyalty: the Case of IT professionals

Among professionals working for small firms in the business technology services sector, mobility is regarded less as a curse and more as an asset that they use to increase their value in the labor market by regularly changing jobs and thereby expanding their skill sets. The portfolio of skills that employers desperately need guarantees them reemployment, given the current state of demand for those skills. In short, they are promised neither job security nor a career path, but then again, they are not asking for them:

> Company loyalty is a lost virtue. In fact many high-tech employees actually place a stigma on remaining with a company longer than three years; IT pros feel this makes them appear lacking in ambition and thus “unplaceable” (Winn, 2001: 63).

Among our respondents, for instance, job security is not a priority. For our sample as a whole, respondents had, on average, as we have previously seen, been in their current jobs (and with their current employer) for 4.4 years and had 12.2 years of experience in their type of position. However, if the respondents who work in big bureaucracies are considered separately from those who work in technology services companies, it can be seen that bureaucracy respondents have been in their positions (and with their current employer) for 8.7 years on average, whereas technology services company respondents have been in theirs for 2.4 years. Similarly, overall, these workers do not see job security as a priority, since owing to how career development works in IT, they need a series of different jobs in order to build their reputations. They are chiefly concerned with acquiring new skills and will remain with an employer so long as they are offered stimulating challenges. As soon as they feel that they are no longer learning, they leave for a job at a competitor (Tremblay, 2003). The rapid pace of obsolescence of IT knowledge forces these skilled workers to constantly acquire new skills in order to maintain their value in the labor market, and that is the goal of their commitment. That is more an individual than an organizational commitment; is it occupational or professional, as often said of qualified professionals? Though it could be, in some ways, we’ll see later that an important change distinguishes these post-bureaucratic IT engineers from their previous counterparts.

A nomadic career therefore becomes the standard (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996; Cappelli, 1999; Stewart, 1999; Tremblay, 2003). They now accept a fixed-length contract that provides an opportunity to acquire new skills, build a reputation, earn a high salary, and enjoy significant autonomy in exchange for their short-term commitment to do whatever it takes to satisfy the project customer. These are short-term psychological contracts. Yet this propensity to favor mobility relies on strong, constant demand on the labor market (Cappelli, 1999: 239). In a different economic context, these professionals would no doubt think twice before leaving their current employer. For the time being, however, many of them are benefiting from a no saturated market.

In light of the situation we have set out above, let's outline the pattern of commitment behavior we have observed.

COMMITMENT BEHAVIOR OF HIGHLY SKILLED PROFESSIONALS

Committed employees can be described as people who do not count their hours, who invest time and energy in their work, devote themselves entirely to their work, and put in greater effort than the norm: people who do more than what they are asked to do or continually exceed expectations (Tremblay & Simard, 2005b; Wils, Labelle, Guérin, & Tremblay, 1998: 31). Various individual commitment behaviors of this type are indicative of generalized organizational commitment. In our survey, the vast majority of human resources officers and project managers said that their professionals were committed, and given the current practice of fixed-term contracts, nothing forces them to rehire an "unsatisfactory" employee. In this part, we will describe the most significant behaviors of these highly qualified professionals and we will explain them. In particular, we will underline how the constraints of this specific labor market: mobility requirement, huge competition between professionals for the advanced projects, etc., explain such behaviors.

Overtime

Long working hours are a common characteristic of companies that practice management by project and employ highly skilled workers (IGDA, 2004: 30; Lapointe, 2005; Legault, 2005; Perrons, 2003; Singh & Vinnicombe, 2000). Among the respondents in the companies we examined, 46% of the women and 83% of the men regularly put in a significant number of overtime hours (Chasserio & Legault, 2005): 49% of our respondents work over 40 hours a week (40% of the women and 58% of the men) and 13.6% over 50 hours a week (6.6% of women and

20% of men). Only very rarely are these overtime hours paid or compensated by time off (Chasserio & Legault, 2005; Legault & Chasserio, 2003).

In both the B2B technology services companies and the IT departments of the two large bureaucracies, employees put in overtime hours at home in the evening or on weekends. Among our respondents, 14 out of 45 women and 27 out of 43 men bring work home in the evening, after the workday, as this respondent explains:

> When it happened recently, I got a computer and took it home with me. That way I can work at home. It doesn't really bother my family. I wait until the children are in bed. (AF-14-7-22-5)

These findings about working hours reveal major differences between men and women. We should remind that, in the IT sector, women are significantly underrepresented (Legault, 2005; Panteli & *al.*, 1999; Valenduc & *al.*, 2004: 14-20). We can remark that women work less in overtime compared to their male colleagues. This difference can be explained by women still being primarily responsible for childcare (Benoît, 2005). We will not discuss here matters discussed in other papers (Legault & Chasserio, 2006), but let's just say that the traditional sexual division of housework and domestic labour is one of the cultural obstacles in the path of professional women. Men and women alike must check their home life at the door and demonstrate their commitment to the company, but the sexual division of domestic labor favors men in this regard (Simpson, 1998).

Working overtime, whether at the office or at home, is a form of commitment behavior (Tremblay & Wils, 2005: 43), and one that is very advantageous for the employer when it is unpaid (Legault & Chasserio, 2003).

Constant Availability

These professionals set no limits on their availability — especially for answering calls from customers — and consider it to be part and parcel of their job (Legault, 2004: 32). For instance, four women and six men wear a pager even at night. The following expressions keep coming up in their explanations: "You have to be available 24 hours a day," "Be available day and night," "You always have to say yes, agree to do anything," "Respond to the needs of users and customers."

Moreover, project managers assess their employees' commitment to the company on the basis of their availability to respond to customers, which becomes a key point if the employee is seeking a promotion (Legault & Chasserio, 2003).

Customer Focus

The job profile given by the professionals we studied is very focused on customer satisfaction, which occupies a central place in the statements and concerns voiced by management and workers (Anderson-Gough, Grey & Robson, 2000; Legge, 1995: 192; Singh & Vinnicombe, 2000): "If the customer is happy, it means we've succeeded," "We work for the customer," "Knowing that the customer is satisfied," "The customer always takes priority." For the employees involved, this customer focus means constantly being available to provide technical support, but also making sure that projects are delivered on schedule and that technical problems are solved promptly. This customer priority sometimes works to the detriment of private and family life:

> It was Father's Day on the weekend, and I had some really good theatre tickets, but at noon on Saturday I got a call: "There's a problem." So I had to go into the office at four o'clock on Saturday afternoon. I missed the play, and [my wife and my child] decided they'd rather not go, so … [INT: And what was your wife's reaction?] My wife's used to it. It's like a doctor who has to go and save someone's life. Either you're self-centered and you want him to change jobs, or you understand that he has to go and save someone's life. Well, I'm in a similar situation: I have to go and save millions for someone else … (CGH-16-18-21-6-01-19-3)

The survival of these companies depends on customer satisfaction. This type of employee behavior is therefore greatly encouraged, far more than loyalty toward the employer. The professionals, for their part, have totally internalized this responsibility and feel guilty if their absence delays the project, especially towards colleagues of the team; self-discipline has replaced authority and reinforcement to good effect:

> Except ... the days that I had to miss. But even then, I caught up afterwards …. Because I felt guilty about not having gone into the office … So when I did go back, for the next three days … I brought some work home to catch up ... My boss didn't ask me to do it ... I did it off my own bat. (AF-12-3-23-5)

In the companies we examined, especially those where the respondents have direct contact with customers (*Insurance-IT, Real Estate Management, IT-1, IT-2* and *IT-3*), 3 of the 6 human resources officers studied and 9 of the 14 project managers of the five companies clearly indicated that giving top priority to the customer was absolutely essential. Moreover, some employees of *IT-1* and *IT-2* were "leased" to their customers for fairly long periods. Under these circumstances, the employees admitted that they felt closer to the customer than to their employer. Working at the customer's site lessens the feeling of belonging to the employer company (Robertson & Swan, 2003), as the human resources manager of *IT-1* notes:

> An employee who goes and works directly at the customer's will obviously have less autonomy, less feeling of belonging, but that doesn't mean that it's zero, it's just less. (MDF-14-7-9-5)

While this obviously committed behavior clearly benefits management by helping it to achieve its sales objectives, retain its customers in the face of competition, and preserve a competitive advantage in the market, its primary focus is the customer, well ahead of the employer, who is a fleeting presence in the professional lives of these high-tech workers.

A CONDUCIVE ENVIRONMENT MUCH MORE THAN AN ACTUAL STRATEGY

Are the very committed behaviors of these employees indicative of effective strategic practices or policies on the part of their employers? Nothing could be less certain.

A Conducive Environment, But No Official Commitment Strategy

Studies reveal a marked tendency for B2B technology services companies to manage their operations, including human resources, through informal practices or policies (Autier & Picq, 2003; Perrons, 2002; Robertson & O'Malley Hammersley, 2000). Both employees and management harbor a certain distrust of any formal structures that could lead them into the kind of bureaucratic system that they associate with reduced efficiency:

> We aren't saddled with the heavy seniority, the heavy bureaucracy — we don't have that at all, not at all. But we do have a certain complexity, because things aren't always clear […]. We don't have an organization chart pinned up on the wall, with squares, and everyone knows exactly in which square …There's a gray area in everyone's job descriptions, just as there's a gray area in the organization chart. (DSF-13-1-23-8)

Similarly, there are no mandatory working schedules. Project managers enjoy discretionary power to approve special arrangements for working hours or place of work (Chasserio & Legault, 2005). They use these “favors” to reward employees for their availability and dedication (and inversely, they use the refusal of those to penalize wrong behaviors). Nevertheless, some employees feel a certain amount of unfairness: 21 women and 10 men clearly stated that they would prefer official written policies that would protect them against arbitrary decisions made by their project managers (Chasserio & Legault, 2005). We noted that, in many areas of human resources management, official practices or policies did not exist across the board, although there were a few significant differences between technology services companies and bureaucracies. In the following sections, we will outline for each topic the observed differences between the B2B companies and our both bureaucracies when it is relevant.

Skills Development

In their study of the software sector, Scholarios and Marks (2004) note that management has a key card to play in the area of skills development. Skilled employees in this sector absolutely have to keep their knowledge up to date if they want to remain employable and preserve their mobility (Baruch, 2001). From a strategic perspective, providing or paying for training helps management foster commitment in its workforce (Cappelli, 2004). In our survey, exceptionally in this regard, the five technology services companies differ from the two bureaucracies, despite significant similarities in other respects.

While employers do offer to reimburse tuition fees for university courses, they do not set aside any free time during the day for taking the courses. Only the IT departments of the two bureaucracies differ in this regard by regularly offering a variety of training sessions during working hours (learning English, learning different computer languages, or supervisory training courses for managers). Thus, 14 of the 19 respondents who take courses during their working hours work in one of the two bureaucracies. The five small companies providing B2B technology services offer little in-house training. When they do, it is in the evening or on weekends (especially for *IT-1* and *IT-3*), and employees are not paid for the hours they attend.

In organizations that have no training policy, workers take matters into their own hands and manage their training as they manage their careers (Hall & Mirvis, 1996). Ten people who work in technology services companies said they were taking evening courses at university, while fifteen others said they were learning on their own. For many of these workers, the succession of varied projects they work on, which are increasingly more advanced technologically, constitute the only place where they can learn new processes or new tools (Carnoy, 2000: 4; Stewart, 1999: 202-217; Tremblay, 2003). Giving these professionals a chance to work on projects that provide opportunities to learn and to tackle stimulating technological challenges could be an effective way of retaining this demanding workforce (Rousseau, 1995, 1996). Yet this kind of career management is not on the agenda in most HR departments. For instance, three human resources officers we surveyed (*IT-3*, *Insurance-IT* and *IT-2*) said that employees are responsible for their own training; and understandably, why pay to train professionals who may soon leave to offer their services to a competitor (Benson, Finegold, & Mohrman, 2004; Cappelli, 1999: 198-200)? A labor market in which there are no shortages and workers are highly mobile encourages short-term reasoning.

Recognition of Effort

The theoretical models of commitment underscore that salary and financial incentives have only a moderate effect on commitment behavior (Singh & Vinnicombe, 2000; Tremblay, Guay, & Simard, 2000). Yet among our respondents, financial compensation is a significant factor in their decision to remain with an organization or not. Six of the seven human resources officers we interviewed said that salary is a major reason for employee departure. Our data do not allow us to be more accurate about our respondents' appraisal of their compensation level. We can only put forward a few hypotheses based on observed behaviours.

Their mean annual salary was around CAD$60,957 in 2000–2001, that is, 50% to 100% higher than that of graduates of the same level in the general population (Legault, 2004: 20-22). Part of their compensation varies with individual performance, which is appraised by the project manager for the employees of the two bureaucracies and in three technology services companies (*IT-1, IT-2, Optics-1*). Four organizations (*Insurance-IT, IT-1, IT-2, Optics-2*) offer stock options to some employees, depending on their status. Despite a sharply higher-than-average compensation level, our respondents still make high pay demands because they compare themselves above all with their peers. They are constantly checking that their employer is paying them according to the prevailing market rate. Compensation is a key factor in mobility, and employers who pay below-market rates run the risk of losing their best employees.

Notwithstanding the observed effect of nonmonetary awards on commitment (Paré, Tremblay, & Lalonde, 2001b: 13), in the organizations we surveyed, these policies have still not really been developed. For instance, *IT-3* gives out an employee-of-the-month award and offers its staff a two-day trip once a year. *Insurance-IT* and *Real Estate Management* give gift certificates to employees who distinguish themselves by proposing innovations or significant improvements that benefit the organization. It's also interesting here to notice that though there's a gap between the human management precepts and the practices set down in the working places visited, the commitment behaviours of the professionals in the B2B sector are still noteworthy.

Reconciling Professional Life and Private Life

Practices or policies intended to help employees achieve a work-life balance (WLB) are just one of a number of commitment strategies (Tremblay, 2002), but they have been found to be effective for highly skilled workers by some researchers (Osterman, 1995; Scandura & Lankau, 1997) and especially for B2B technology services workers, IT specialists and engineers (Paré, Tremblay, & Lalonde, 2001a, 2001b; Scholarios & Marks, 2004), among whom the practices or policies bolster commitment (Grover & Crooker, 1995). In the organizations we surveyed, however, there are virtually no official WLB policies (Chasserio & Legault, 2005). These organizations meet the minimum threshold set by the Quebec Act respecting labour standards, but go no further in implementing WLB policies covering days off for family reasons, financial assistance for family support, child care or parent care, flexible work schedules, shorter working hours or working from home. What is worse, some organizations (*Insurance-IT, Real Estate Management, IT-1* and *IT-2)* have programs for compressed workweeks or banking overtime hours, but in practice the project manager has full discretionary power to decide whether to apply them or not, and the widespread view is that they are incompatible with project management (and perhaps incompatible with high-performance workplaces in general, according to Hochschild, 1997). Ad hoc arrangements between the employee and project manager are still the most frequent solution to the work-life balance problem and are the subject of a tacit psychological contract between the employee and manager (Legault, 2004: 60-62). The project manager grants special arrangements (time off in lieu of overtime pay, working from home) to employees who have proven their commitment by putting in lots of overtime, for instance; this is also a form of nonmonetary recognition. But if the project manager turns down the requested special arrangement, even though the employee has already worked a lot of unpaid overtime, the relationship of trust between the two will be broken, and the employee will regard the decision as being grossly unfair.

In short, our findings show that management does not bother devising commitment strategies in B2B technology services and that the conditions specific to the organization of work by project are the real source of commitment behavior.

Organization by Project: A Means of Fostering Autonomy and Empowerment

The five B2B technology services firms and the IT departments of the two bureaucracies organize their work *by project*, as is done in the sector as a whole (Berrebi-Hoffmann, 2002; DeFillippi, 2003; Legault, 2005). The project manager builds a team with people whose combined skill sets will meet the customer's request. Experts are called in when needed and do not have any job security; they consider that they have a nomadic career and that mobility is an essential characteristic of their profession (Tremblay, 2003). Once the project has been delivered, the team is disbanded, and each member is either assigned to a new project or leaves to go to work for another employer (Berrebi-Hoffmann, 2002; DeFillippi, 2003). Under these circumstances, project success and customer satisfaction are what make an employee's reputation, which is the best asset to have on the job market. The management of highly skilled specialists working on a project is necessarily associated with very broad autonomy in the performance of tasks, significant leeway in decision making, and associated accountability; customer dissatisfaction will tarnish the reputations of the project manager and the entire team. Aside from the project manager's oversight with respect to staying within budget and meeting project milestones, the professionals involved are free to make arrangements with the customer and have broad powers to act (choosing how a problem is to be tackled, setting priorities). Their responsibility is as great as that of an entrepreneur: their next job will depend on the success or failure of their current project. This is sufficient incentive for the commitment behaviors identified in the research and discussed in the preceding section (Chasserio & Legault, 2005).

Of the employees surveyed, 57% (38 out of 67 people) said that they enjoyed broad, if not total autonomy in their positions; 30% said they had a fair amount of autonomy, with their project manager checking on them from time to time, especially to see whether the work was on schedule. Furthermore, when they were asked what the qualities of the ideal employee are, 36%

said that autonomy was an essential characteristic in their profession. As we have already seen, empowerment is a major factor in leveraging commitment; but among these employees, management does not need take any specific steps to implement it, since it is already an integral part of the mode of work organization and of a labor market where there is significant mobility.

Among respondents this manifests itself through extreme concern over meeting deadlines, staying within budget, and ensuring quality work, as indicated by the following expressions: "On-time delivery," "I call it a success when I deliver on time something that works the way it's supposed to," "Meet your deadlines," or "Finish the project on time and on budget":

> Well, sometimes maybe I worked a little slower for an hour or two, maybe not consciously … […] I set my own goals for what I should get done in the day. [...] If I haven't done enough in a day, I don't feel good about it! [Do you feel guilty about it?] Yes, I don't know why. […] I feel bad … I stay at work longer. (STF-13-3-4-4)

Oversight is unnecessary in a context where workers discipline themselves like entrepreneurs, despite their status as salaried employees (Castells, 2001: 55-60; Legault, 2004; Robertson & Swan, 2003). They often refer to themselves as consultants. Moreover, the competition for more technologically challenging projects also elicits commitment behavior. Managers of "cutting-edge" projects are more demanding with respect to availability and skills and recruit only the most committed workers. To increase their chances of being hired for the most interesting projects, the most ambitious workers demonstrate their availability and dedication by, for instance, putting in overtime. Professionals who cannot or will not play the game of presenteeism are stuck with less interesting projects, such as those that involve using older computer languages, maintaining legacy systems, or providing user support (Legault & Chasserio, 2003; see also Simpson, 1998).

Yet, for all that, committed workers are not stable in their jobs or loyal to their employers. They receive little recognition from them, but the people they really want it from are their customers. Unless they are bound to their customers by a maintenance contract, professionals have only a fleeting relationship with them (Alvesson, 2000), yet customer satisfaction is the best guarantee of a worker's next contract. Not only are they fairly unresponsive to practices or policies intended to keep them in a given organization, they are far more committed to pleasing the customer than the employer, although only over the short term. The behavior we observed is not a sign of generalized organizational commitment to the employer, but rather of employees' individual strategies to maintain their employability, which *result in* an individual commitment of an entrepreneurial kind.

CONCLUSION

Informal human resources management practices and forms of work organization are the organizational factors most relevant to workers in the B2B technology services sector. Observation of organizational behavior and managerial attitudes to commitment in these new economy organizations reveals just how they differ from the prescriptions of strategic HR management. While employers recognize the importance of their human capital, they do not bother with commitment strategies, and why would they? The current state of the IT engineering job market and management by project give rise to significant short-term commitment behaviors. Human resources stability is neither necessary nor profitable for management, as the required skill sets are constantly changing, and flexibility is more highly valued. The HR department is more often than not confined to overseeing compliance with employment contracts and legislation — a role far removed from the principles of strategic management, the application of which is superfluous in this context. There seems to be a certain consensus between the parties about allowing the laws of the marketplace to govern their professional relationship; this consensus should continue for as long as the market remains buoyant, but could be compromised by any change in its economics.

A number of conditions essential to the success of this arrangement are specific to the sector under study, that is, a very educated, nonunionized population; organization of work by projects; strong, steady demand; a highly skilled workforce able to work with little supervision and to assume responsibility for customer satisfaction; very high pay; and very few hierarchical levels. All of these conditions would appear to be necessary to workers' self-driven commitment. The question that needs to be asked is whether this model can be transferred to other sectors of the economy. Its influence can, of course, be seen in the form of "advanced teamwork" experiences, efforts aimed at making industrial employees more independent (Bélanger, Edwards, & Wright, 2003; Chatzis, Mounier, Vetz, & Zarifian, 1999; Linhart, 2004; Périlleux, 2001). However, organizations that would like to implement a form of management by project and that see in it a model to be emulated will not necessarily meet all the conditions required to obtain the same results (Bélanger, Edwards, & Wright, 2003). Any assumption that the same results can be achieved with less-skilled workers, in a bureaucratic or Taylorist form of organization, is surely premature.

Our study presents several limitations that should be addressed in future research. Indeed our findings are based on a qualitative research with a limited size in a Canadian context. To be able to generalize our results, it would be useful to conduct a research on a larger sample of highly qualified professionals to identify more precisely the links between HR policies and behaviors and, to stand out workplaces without official HR policies. Another way to explore is the differences between these B2B technology services companies which have informal ways to manage and the more traditional small businesses: are there such differences or do we imagine them?

There is also a need for longitudinal researches on the topic of nomadic career and the concept of commitment. Our study presents a snapshot of the current situation of highly qualified professionals in the context of the B2B technology services companies, but it would be really relevant to follow these professionals along their professional life. Several points should be specified: How does the commitment of these professionals evolve through the different projects and the different employers? Is the nomadic career path relevant all along their professional life or could these professionals move to more traditional careers when major changes occur in their private life (children, illness), etc.? The notion of life cycle should be introduced in the reflection on career paths. In such reflection, it is particularly relevant to follow a differentiated analysis between women and men as we have done in our research (Legault & Chasserio, 2006). In conclusion, our research which takes place in the particular context of the B2B technology services companies, gives some indications on the actual transformation of labor market rules, on the changes in the relationship between employers and employees. However, as we outlined before, the success of this work model requires several conditions which are peculiar to this economic sector, the so-called “New Economy”; so the generalization of these success recipes to others sectors of economy requires in-depth researches.

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