Understanding the Workplace Commitment for Generation Y in Hong Kong - A Qualitative Study

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Abstract
There have been many research studies comparing the workplace commitment of different generations, but such research is rare in Asian context. Given the diverse workforce population of Generation Y (Y’ers), it is believed that this generation will have the power to change the workforce. The turnover rate for Y’ers is higher than other generations; hence organizations also struggle to retain the good employees. This paper aims to understand the workplace commitment level of Y’ers working in Hong Kong, so that organizations are able to design measures to help increase their work commitment and thus, reduce employee turnover in the long run. The study concludes with the findings from a qualitative study and suggests measures for organizations to attract and retain Generation Y employees.

Keywords: Generation Y, Workplace Commitment, Affective Commitment, Normative Commitment, Continuance Commitment.

1. Introduction
Retaining good employees and developing future leaders are crucial organizational goals. To fulfill these goals, organizations must understand the needs of today’s diverse workforce who come from different generational cohorts. The three major workforce generational cohort groups today are the Baby Boomers (aged 51-69), Generation X (aged 35-50) and Generation Y (aged 15-34). Of these three cohort groups, managers realized that the Generation Y is different from the other two generations (Twenge and Campbell, 2008), and are mainly composed of the offspring of the Baby Boomers. Hence, the cognizance of generational differences among employees will increase employee retention, abate generational conflicts, raise productivity, and create a generational synergy (Riescher,
In fact, for the future success of the organizations, the need to understand the attitudes of different generational cohorts will also be an important determining factor (Alas, 2005).

In Hong Kong, Generation X consists of 1.5 million people, who were born between 1965 and 1980, and makes up about 37% of the workforce. Generation Y consists of 1.3 million people, who were born between 1981 and 2000, and forms around 34% of the workforce, while the Baby Boomers consists of 1.2 million people, who were born between 1946 and 1964, and compose the rest 29% of the workforce (Passport, 2015).

Though Generation Y is the second largest workforce after Generation X, Alch (2000) argues that there has been acute animosity among generational cohorts upon the entry of Generation Y into the workforce. Considering Generation Y as a volatile group of employees, 59% of respondents across all business sectors stated that Generation Y employees present specific management challenges such as a lack of loyalty to organizations and unrealistic job expectations that make them hard to manage; they tend to change jobs quite frequently and do not seem to contemplate long term careers (South China Morning Post, 2011). This creates a big challenge for human resources, which makes it difficult for organizations to deliver quality and consistent service to their customers. Engelman (2009) believes that compared to other generations, the turnover rate for Generation Y is higher and therefore organizations struggle to retain good employees of this generation. This paper aims to understand the workplace commitment level of Generation Y working in Hong Kong. By doing so, organizations will be able to design measures to help augment work commitment of Generation Y and reduce employee turnover in the long run.

This paper begins with an overview on generations and a background on Generation Y. However, the older segment (aged 25-34) of Generation Y is our main focus since they have been in the workforce for a considerable time. It is then followed by a discussion about the organizational commitment and finally concludes with a discussion on generational and organizational commitment theory and how they are related.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Generation Y

Generation Y is luckier than the preceding generations since they have been able to avail the benefits of the Internet age. They are not only technologically savvy (Patterson, 2005),
but are also considered optimistic, confident, achievement-oriented, socially adept, moral, street smart, and dynamic (Zemke et al., 2000). However, they are also labeled as ungrateful, impatient, blunt, expressive, and at the same time the other generations have failed to comprehend what Generation Y employees think. Their parents, being overly protective in every sphere of their lives (Atkinson, 2008), have made it hard for some of the Generation Y to assimilate the reality shock when they eventually enter the workforce. They view a job as a means to earn a living while they need to enjoy refreshments and relaxations in their leisure (Atkinson, 2008). They demand a balanced work-life schedule, and have also proved to be multitasking people. Apparently, they have a passion for challenges and love stretching their intelligence, and so are easily bored with simple projects. (Atkinson, 2008).

2.2 Organizational Commitment

In organizational behavior and industrial psychology, organizational commitment is described as the ‘degree to which an employee identifies with a particular organization and its goals, and wishes to maintain membership in that organization (Robbins & Coulter, 2014). Why is organizational commitment important? Research has demonstrated that higher organizational commitment leads to lower level of employee turnover, which is a good indicator of employee turnover (Meyer & Allen, 1991; Meyer, Stanley, Herscovitch & Topolnytsky, 2002). Therefore, the higher the level of commitment, the lower the turnover rate will be and vice-versa (Adams, 2006). Meyer and Allen (1991) observed that the employee turnover is directly tied to an employee’s organizational commitment.

2.3 The Three-Component Model

The three component model of organizational commitment, developed by Meyer and Allen (1991), has become the leading model for studies of workplace commitment. While some studies have shown that the model is not consistent with empirical findings, it has been proven to be a valid measurement of organizational commitment and employee turnover if it is associated with other commitment research studies (Meyer et al., 1993; Irving et al., 1997; Snape& Redman, 2003; Huang & You, 2010; Smith & Hall, 2008).

The three-component model of organizational commitment (Meyer and Allen, 1991, 1997) consists of affective commitment (AC), normative commitment (NC) and continuance
commitment (CC). In brief, AC refers to the affection for someone’s own job (*want to stay in organization*) – i.e. when any employee feels a strong attachment to his/her organization and to the work he/she does; NC refers to the sense of obligation to stay (*ought to stay in organization*) - where an employee feels a sense of belongingness in his/her organization even if he/she is not happy in his/her role; and CC refers to fear of loss (*have to stay in organization*) because of an accumulated investments or lack of other comparable alternatives. The objective of this qualitative study is to comprehend Hong Kong’s Generation Y’s workplace commitment, which will be achieved through this three-component model that is assumed to be valid for predicting turnover. The study intends to do so by addressing the following research question: What are the attitudes of Generation Y towards affective, normative and continuance commitments?

3. Research Method

The study is conducted primarily by means of individual interviews, along with the quantitative survey using the three-component commitment survey (Meyer and Allen, 1991). The design of the interview for this study is semi-structured. This type of interview provides a research environment where respondents are free to express their opinions and researchers are able to probe and encourage respondents to explain and expand on their responses (Yin, 2014). Moreover, a semi-structured interview utilizes the techniques of both structured and unstructured interviews, implying that this method is both exploratory and explanatory. Furthermore, respondents can provide both qualitative and quantitative data.

The design of the interview consists of face-to-face interviews with employees from Generation Y from several industries. It must be noted that convenience sampling was used in the sample selection.

4. Findings and Discussion

Eight individual interviews were conducted among which - four were of males and four were of females. Their working experience ranged from one to three years and all of them were non-managers. Three respondents were from tertiary education sector, one from the electronics industry, one from medical science and three from marketing sector.

Participants were first asked to fill in the three-component commitment survey before the interview, then each participant was asked questions related to the model.
4.1 Affective Commitment

Participants were first asked if they would be happy to spend the rest of their career in their organization and why. Out of eight, three indicated yes. Some of the reasons are “it is because the compensation in this organization attracts me to spend the rest of my career here”, “the organization provides good welfare benefits for employees such as medical insurance,” and “because of the prospect and benefits that this organization could provide.” It is found that the compensation and fringe benefits are the reasons why the employees are willing to stay in the organization. Interestingly, all three with this response were from tertiary education sector. However, the other three working in marketing, from commercial sectors, did not share the same view. Their comments are given below:

“Working at a loyalty marketing agency but the company does not have loyalty itself among co-workers. The philosophy on what we do and our working style is different as well.”

“Poor management style exerts a lot of pressure on employees – there is also pressure to perform something that has been oversold and overlooked.”

“I like to be in pursuit of a company with larger scale from job to job.”

Most of the participants neither agree nor disagree with the question whether they are ‘emotionally attached’ to their organizations. Two participants that voiced out the disagreement thought the company does not foster positive culture, does not reward employees adequately and that the interaction between colleagues is not enough. The one participant, who is emotionally attached to the organization, has some very close colleagues who help him/her a lot in his/her career development.

4.2 Continuance Commitment

Next, participants were asked if it would be difficult to leave the organization now even if they wanted to. Five of them agreed to this statement, and some of the reasons are quoted below:

“I am developing my experience in this industry.”

“It would be hard to leave now because I am still in the process of handling two accounts and I am waiting for the right moment to leave.”
“I just started this job in this organization and do not plan to leave as it is a great learning experience.”

They also concurred that too much of their life would be disrupted if they leave the organization now. Some of the reasons are: financial burden, difficulty in getting a job in the same industry, and familiarity with the culture and working environment.

4.3 Normative Commitment

Participants were asked if they have the obligation to stay with their current employer, or will they feel guilty if they leave the current employer now. Five to six participants feel obliged to remain with the current employer and would feel guilty if they leave the organization. Some of the reasons given are:

“The organization would increase its resources to hire another person to replace me. My employer gave me a chance here and I am prepared to stay in this organization for at least 2-3 years.”

“My employer treats me well and I do not want to disappoint him. Also, I have a strong sense of obligation and vocation especially to my employer and direct supervisor.”

However, most of them neither agree nor disagree that the organization deserves their loyalty. Some of the reasons are:

“The fringe benefits are not high and the attendance tracking system (on time) makes me feel like the company does not trust me, so it does not deserve my loyalty.”

“With the recent events that I have observed in this company, including management’s treatment of various colleagues within this organization, I do not think it deserves much of my loyalty anymore.”

Two participants mentioned that the organization deserves their loyalty because it provides good benefits and good work environment to them.

4.4 Importance Level of Commitment

Each participant was then asked which type of commitment seems more important among the three. Out of the eight respondents, five mentioned that affective commitment
appealed more to them. The following are some quotes as to why they chose affective commitment over the other two commitments.

“The amount of happiness you get from the job would affect the way you work and the level of commitment.”

“It is important to have some sort of emotional attachment to your workplace otherwise you will be reluctant to go to work every morning.”

“Affective commitment appeals to me the most because I believe that if management’s vision and strategies are consistent and do not change all the time, this will exert less pressure on employees and thus will strengthen my emotional attachment to the organization.”

“Personal attachment will keep me in the company for long.”

Two participants considered continuance commitment to be more appealing to them.

“More like if I can get satisfaction on what I am doing in this organization (e.g. passionate for what I do, appreciation from colleagues and clients) that keep me moving.”

“Continuance commitment; because I plan to stay in this organization for a long period of time, continuance commitment is very important for me to maintain my morale and performance.”

Only one participant considered normative commitment is more important to him/her because he/she has a strong sense of responsibility and vocation to the organization and the employer if they treat him/her well.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, the study revealed that there are differences in workplace commitments among Generation Y. Although the sample is very small, it does suggest some recommendations for the employers to consider if they wish to retain good Generation Y employees.

It is suggested that if employees have strong affective commitment, they will tend to work for a longer tenure in the organization. There are changes that organizations could also make if they wish to retain the Generation Y employees. For instance, organizations can provide some new and meaningful tasks that the Generation Y employees can take ownership of. It is also important to create an interactive working culture as a way of retaining good Generation Y
employees. Proper and adequate fringe benefits are also significant factors for employers to take into account. The three participants from the Education sector seem to prefer working in the tertiary institutions since their fringe benefits are lucrative to them. The Generation Y employees could be assigned not only challenging, but also meaningful work with clear objectives, and provided with consistent constructive feedback, immediate praise and reward for good performance.

Lastly but most importantly, the organizations must hire leaders or supervisors who are trustworthy, capable of handling office politics and providing opportunities to the Generation Y employees for their development and advancement. It is essential to establish a coach or mentor-like relation between the supervisor and Generation Y employees.

References


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