The uneasy relationship between strategic HRM and employee commitment.
Can the two be reconciled?

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ABSTRACT

Over the past two decades, Human Resource Management (HRM) literature has been increasingly focused on employee commitment and the contribution this makes to personal and organisational performance. Contrary to the rhetoric however, it appears that workers’ commitment levels are declining and ‘Strategic’ HRM is, in part, a factor in this decline. This paper explores the issues and challenges associated with workplace involvement and, in particular, how HRM often plays a significant role in extinguishing commitment. It is argued that the predicament is not indicative of flawed HRM theory, rather it results from the marginalisation of HRM which is caused by the failure, intentional or otherwise, of human resource professionals to implement the commitment-focused models proposed by contemporary theorists.

Keywords: employee involvement, human resource management and organisational performance, new forms of work organisation, strategic human resource management

Although employee commitment is widely advanced as a core objective of HRM, many HR policies and practices are actually reducing, not fostering, employee commitment. Arguably, the most revolutionary period in HRM theory was the decade commencing in the early 1980s. During those years, innovative frameworks for managing the employment relationship were introduced and, as a result, ‘personnel management’ (PM) was transformed into ‘human resource management’ (Beer, Spector, Lawrence, Mills & Walton, 1984; Guest 1987a; Storey 1992; Walton 1985a; Walton 1985b). A common feature of these models was the responsibility of management to initiate and sustain employee commitment to the organisation. Consequential benefits were presumed to accrue to all stakeholders: higher organisational performance, improved psychological and material rewards for workers and societal wellbeing. More recently, HRM theory – which here includes strategic HRM - has begun to incorporate high performance work systems (HPWS) which aim to maximise alignment between organisations’ technical systems and social systems; the latter includes fostering employee commitment and involvement (Applebaum, Bailey, Berg & Kalleberg 2000; Lowe, Delbridge & Oliver 1997; Neal & Tromley 1995; Varna, Beatty, Schneier & Ulrich 1999).

Whilst the models which underpin HRM promise to connect it with business performance, empower HR professionals, and improve many aspects of employees’ work experience, after 20 years it seems that few of these aspirations have been realised. In particular, it has resulted in many workers
experiencing disengagement with the organisation and its goals. This paper argues that this problem is the result, in part, of HR managers being unable or unwilling to put into practise those actions which lead to a committed workforce. As Ramsay, Scholarios and Harley (2000) argue, while HRM aims to achieve superior performance, such gains should not be at the expense of more stressed workers. Whereas traditional PM adopted a long term approach by seeking to develop employment relationships in a pluralistic climate of negotiation and co-operation, the present concern is that HRM appears to have eroded these values in favour of imperatives which are typified by short-term perspectives driven, in the main, by economic objectives.

Studies into worker commitment reveal mixed outcomes. Some findings suggest that workers are reasonably satisfied (Bearfield 2003; Considine & Callus 2003; Wooden & Warren 2004), but Watson, Buchanan, Campbell and Briggs (2003) reported dissatisfaction across a number of variables, especially stress, work/family balance, job insecurity, boring work, career prospects and unfair pay, and Wooden (2000) described how job insecurity, long working hours and earnings inequality all impact negatively on workers. Edgar and Geare (2005), Wood and DeMenezes (1998), and WorkUSA 2000 (1999) suggested employee commitment is patchy and contingent on the presence of particular management behaviours. Crosby (2002) found that some young people prefer to rely on unemployment benefits than face the humiliation encountered at some workplaces, and he also referred to the AWIRS (Australian Workplace Industrial Relations Survey) survey of 1995 which indicated two thirds of workers could not trust, or did not know whether they could trust, their managers. On the connection with HRM, Guest (2002: 336) reported that managers ‘fail to implement the sort of HRM that might engage the commitment of workers.’

This paper considers the discord between contemporary discourse on commitment and the demands for immediacy and performance outcomes which drive many HRM practices, and explores how this incongruence stifles employee identification with organisations and their goals. It is constructed within the framework of critical organisation research, the goal of which is to ‘create societies and workplaces which are free from domination, where all members have an equal opportunity to contribute to … systems which meet human needs and lead to the progressive development of all’
It is imperative that HRM be considered from the critical perspective because, as Keegan and Boselie (2006) have indicated, it countervails the normative position which dominates mainstream HRM literature. Notwithstanding, HRM discourse should not consider the criticalist and managerialist approaches as mutually exclusive; clarity in managing the employment relationship can only be achieved when the motivations and voice of all parties are embraced. Thus, by concentrating on the deficiencies of HRM in addressing the issues of employee commitment, this paper supports Robbins and Barnwell’s (2006) sympathies with managing in a difficult environment and aims to contribute to this endeavour.

**HRM AND EMPLOYEE COMMITMENT**

Evaluating the psychological aspects of attitudinal and behavioural commitment in the context of compliance and commitment, Legge (2005) refuted the argument that HR policies necessarily engender employee behaviours which enhance organisational performance. Notwithstanding Guest’s (1992b) caution against conflating process and outcomes in moving from psychological to behavioural commitment, the nexus between worker commitment and organisational performance is supported in the literature due to commitment being linked to individual effort (Curry, Wakefield, Price & Muellen 1986; Guest 1987b; Mathieu & Zajac 1990; Randall 1987). Thus, contemporary HRM inquiry and practice is often directed towards the development of workplaces which foster the commitment of workers to their employing organisations (Marchington, Goodman, Wilkinson & Ackers 1992; Millward, Bryson & Forth 2000). However, evidence suggests that levels of employee commitment are not improving and may be deteriorating (Baruch 1998; DeMeuse & Tornow 1996; Jurkiewicz 2000; Kalleberg 2001; Kelly & Kelly 1991; Vandenberg & Self 1993).

Several models have been devised which endeavour to explain the nature and management of organisational commitment. Of the various models advanced, Kanter (1968), Meyer and Allen (1997), Salancik (1977) and Mowday, Porter and Steers (1982) are widely cited. Whilst they appear to be different in character and design, their components are largely analogous. Figure 1 summarises their main features, which in essence bifurcate around two major themes regarding the type of commitment experienced by employees: behavioural and emotional commitment.
As shown in Figure 1, behavioural commitment represents the obligations and norms expected in organisations. Working from an economic rationale and motivated by the costs associated with separation, employees comply with management without actually engaging emotionally with the organisation at a deeper level. On the other hand, emotional/affective commitment allows the individual to bond with the organisation psychologically. Strong positive attitudes thus link employees to the organisation beyond behavioural compliance. Etzioni (1969, 1975) proposed a model consistent with these themes, but also introduced a third dimension. He reasoned commitment was a continuum, ranging in intensity from positive, moral involvement through neutral calculative involvement to the negative, alienative involvement. This is shown in Figure 2, depicted as an
extension of emotional and behavioural commitment, so that at one extreme there can be a deeply held emotional binding to the organisation, but at the other it is decoupled, resulting in alienation.

**Figure 2: Continuum of Commitment**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Emotional/affective feelings towards the organization</th>
<th>Behavioural obligations and norms binding employees to the organization</th>
<th>Employees have no identification with the organisation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kanter, Meyer &amp; Allen, Salancik, Mowday <em>et al</em>, Etzioni</td>
<td>Kanter, Meyer &amp; Allen, Salancik, Mowday <em>et al</em>, Etzioni</td>
<td>Etzioni</td>
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The significance of Etzioni’s work is that it recognised an aspect of commitment which other research overlooks – that workers may experience intense negative emotion about their organisation. Whilst the desirable state of the employer-employee relationship is a deeply imbedded psychological commitment, it appears many HR professionals are content with manipulating overt behaviour in order to generate compliance. This paper proposes that such an approach forces employees further along the continuum to that state which Etzioni (1969, 1975) terms alienative involvement. Etzioni (1969: 65) equated alienative involvement in the employment relationship to ‘adventure capitalism, where trade is built on isolated acts of exchange, each side trying to maximize immediate profit’.

Given that the context of this discussion is psychological commitment (as opposed to behavioural commitment), employee identification with organisations is treated as a subjective, psychological experience, rather than an objective reality. Because commitment is a state of mind, employees’ perceptions of their own attachment can be influenced; that is, shifted from a compliance mind-set to an emotional connectedness with the organisation. The issue facing management is whether HRM makes a positive contribution to, or detracts from, employees’ feelings of commitment.

**HRM AND CURRENT MANAGEMENT PRACTICES**

Several HRM models have proposed the integration of business strategies and HR systems (Fombrun, Tichy & Devanna 1984; Mintzberg & Waters 1985; Butler, Ferris & Cook 1988). However, research suggests that some current practices based on the principles advocated in these
models, particularly those outlined below, have a negative impact on employee commitment. Whilst the principal driver of these practices may have been external variables, their implementation has only been possible with the collaboration and participation of HR managers. HRM therefore, as the handmaiden of such management behaviour, must shoulder some of the responsibility of the resultant negative outcomes. Chief among those negative outcomes is declining commitment which Guest (2002) asserts is an anticipated result of neglecting the well-being of employees.

**Outsourcing**

Based on the core-periphery model of employment, outsourcing involves non-organisational employees executing activities which were previously undertaken in-house (Capelli 1999; Daley 2002). The anticipated advantages include: the liberation of expert staff from routine or non-core work, the availability of broader expertise, cost efficiency, no psychological contracts to honour, less legal obligations, reduced union power, and enhancing management prerogative (Pinnington & Lafferty 2003; Purcell 1999). As Daley (2002: 20) noted however, outsourcing ‘can produce futile, short-term benefits…’ by increasing the risk of diminished skill formation and loss of intellectual capital (Mabey, Salaman & Storey 1999), fostering inequitable pay and conditions, creating perceptions of job insecurity, and compromising data security (Pinnington & Lafferty 2003). In this environment, employees’ commitment to both the organisation and co-workers is degraded, and trust in management is negatively affected (Baron & Kreps 1999; DeNisi & Griffin 2001; James 1995).

**The Contingent Workforce**

The 40-hour, Monday to Friday employment model has been progressively ceded to contingent patterns of work (Allan, Brosnan & Walsh 1998; Murtough & Waite 2000; Rasell & Applebaum 1997); approximately 30 per cent of Australian workers are now casually employed (ABS 2004). For organisations, casual employment offers cheaper labour costs, ease of dismissal, ability to match labour-time to workload fluctuations, and enhanced control (Campbell 2001). For employees however, casual arrangements classify them as an inferior class of labour compared to permanent workers; their conditions being characterised by substandard rights, benefits and protection, plus substantial levels of precariousness (Burgess & Campbell 1998; Campbell 2000). In general, the
management of causal labour emphasises cost reduction and monitoring rather than commitment, trust and development (Brosnan & Walsh 1996; Legge 2005; Sheehan, Holland & Dowling 2006).

**The Training Deficit**

Associated with the rise of contingent employment is a discrepancy between the training afforded to permanent and non-permanent employees (Campbell 2001; Combet 2003; Lowry, Simon & Kimberley 2002; Wooden 2001). Curtain (1996) estimated that 80 per cent of casual employees have fewer opportunities for training than permanent employees, and Campbell (2001) and Hall, Bretherton and Buchanan (2000) argued that the training deficit is a result of employer attitudes. They contended that Australia’s under-investment in training for non-permanent employees is born of a persistent focus on short-term outcomes and cost minimisation, despite evidence that this may result in skills shortages, poor planning, reduced commitment, and a decline in productivity.

** Downsizing**

Promising lower overheads, more efficient communication, reduced bureaucracy and faster decision making, downsizing has been a key organisational reaction to global competition, lower productivity and increasing labour costs (Applebaum, Delage, Labib & Gault 1997; Cummings & Worley 2001; Elmuti & Kathawala 1993). Research however, has generally failed to reveal a strong link between downsizing and profitability for the future; in fact, the opposite is not uncommon (Drew 1994; Harrell-Cook & Ferris 1999). Downsizing results in employees having lower levels of commitment (Downs & Stogner 1995); a condition manifest in increased secrecy and competitiveness (Newell & Lloyd 2002), a more transactional perception of the psychological contract, a focus on extrinsic motivators (Ebadan & Winstanley 1997; Martin, Staines & Pate 1998), and behaviours associated with ‘survivor syndrome’ (Boroson & Burgess 1992; Brockner 1988).

**Technology**

In adopting sophisticated technology, HR professionals are presented with a choice which can have significant consequences for the organisation and its employees. On one hand, it can result in the de-skilling and task specialisation typical of the scientific management era; on the other hand, it can be the mainspring of skill development and quality management (Upton 1995; Youndt, Snell, Dean &
Lepak 1996). The former is characterised by employee role behaviours associated with cost reduction strategies: repetitive and predictable activities, short-term focus, and low risk-taking, while the latter is characterised by employee role behaviours associated with innovation strategies: creative behaviour, longer-term focus, and a greater degree of risk-taking (Schuler & Jackson, 1999). Although commitment can be significantly enhanced by the practices associated with innovation strategies (Evans 2003; Pinnington & Edwards 2000; Storey & Quintas 2001), many organisations still rely on technology and systems which focus on cost reduction (Pruijt 1997; Wall & Parker 1998) and, by extension, employee role behaviours which generate disaffection.

**Work Re-design**

Over the years, attempts to redesign work have yielded mixed outcomes. Programs such as the ‘quality of work life’ movement of the 1970s, Total Quality Management, and present strategies involved with HPWS reveal conflicting evidence of their efficacy (Blyton & Morris 1992; Claydon & Doyle 1996; Harari 1993; Lawler 1996; Mullins 2005; Niven 1993). A critical issue of work re-design is control. While some argue that these initiatives are genuinely aimed at giving workers greater autonomy and control, others claim that they are thinly veiled instruments by which management can exert increased control (Edwards 1995; Mabey et al. 1999; Willmott 1995). Hellriegel and Slocum (1978), Delbridge, Turnbull and William (1992), and Sewell and Wilkinson (1992) reported on a number of methods of control, including budgets, structure, policies, recruitment, training, reward/punishment systems and technology.

Although the above tactics have been in widespread practice for over 20 years, and despite the fact that they have not, in many instances, delivered the benefits expected, they remain in common use. Yet HRM, under the mantle of its strategic role, has remained relatively silent on the matter. Surely, it should be a central role of HR professionals to instigate policies and procedures which neutralise, or at least mitigate, the negative affect these practices have on employee commitment.

**THE ROLE OF HRM – PERSISTENT AMBIGUITY AND AMBIVALENCE**

Accompanying the shift from PM to HRM was a rift in the identity of the discipline. Twenty years on, this dissonance is enduring and unresolved. On one hand, HRM is expected to emphasise
employee development, participation and trust; that is, the ‘soft’ model. On the other hand, HRM is also expected to ensure the full utilisation of employees in the pursuit of performance improvement and competitive advantage; that is, the ‘hard’ model (Deery, Plowman, Walsh & Brown 2001; Grant & Shields 2002; Keenoy 1990; Storey 1992). The hard approach is at the heart of strategic HRM, which emerged from linking HR systems with the planning functions of top management (Fombrun et al. 1984). Given the dysfunctional consequences of declining commitment already described, a major question is whether HRM can, in reality, satisfy the needs of both the organisation and individual employees; indeed, Truss, Gratton, Hope-Hailey, McGovern & Styles (1997) argue that hard and soft models are so incompatible that they cannot be incorporated in a single HRM model.

Yet the HRM rhetoric claims it should be equally beneficial for both parties. Ulrich (1997) encapsulated this notion by defining the roles of HRM as strategic partner, administrative expert, employee champion and change agent. Whether HRM will, or indeed can, embrace the needs of all stakeholder remains an equivocal issue.

Several HRM strategies, whilst enhancing productivity and employee-organisational fit, can be interpreted as covert mechanisms of control. The management of organisational culture provides an example of this. Whilst Kamoche (1991) and Kanter (1989) believed that employee commitment built around organisational culture leads to improved firm performance, Legge (2005) argued that this model uses culture to cynically manipulate a shift from forced compliance to commitment. Legge (2001) also questioned research suggesting culture management can deliver both commitment and high performance. The fact remains that organisations, via HRM, try to influence culture with a view to increasing organisational performance and creating employees’ perception of alignment between the ‘inner self’ and ‘organisational self.’ The fact that these efforts seem only partially successful emphasises the extreme difficulties in achieving the alignment discussed. Research in areas of control and culture has therefore only met with limited success in terms of dealing with employee commitment (Guest 1992a; Legge 2005; Noon & Blyton 2002; Salaman 2001; Wood 1989).

Guest (2001: 111) observed that, ‘One of the important and persistent findings from research is the low adoption of ‘high commitment’ or progressive human resource practices…’ and, in doing so,
casts doubt on the efficacy of HRM. The questions raised earlier about the issue of whether it is possible to change organisational culture remain unanswered. A further matter concerns the shift from collectivism to individualism which has accompanied the transition from PM to HRM (Australian Government 2005; Purcell 1987; Storey & Bacon 1993). Whilst this might suit some employers for reasons such as de-unionisation, individual agreements and the prohibition of unfair dismissal claims (Peetz 2006), it arguably serves only to reinforce the managerial control. Certainly, it does not align with the notions of consultation, commitment and stimulating identification with organisational culture which are associated with HRM and HPWS.

Advocates of HPWS point to the pivotal role which selection and training has in its achievement (Ebel 1991; Redman & Matthews 1998; Simmons, Shadur & Preston 1995). Salaman (2001) however, regarded these as instruments which covertly secure commitment and manipulate culture. He argued that this may occur at three levels. Firstly by only selecting those persons compatible with the organisation, its goals, and structural arrangements. Secondly, through the orientation processes, inculcating new appointees with the organisation’s philosophies and beliefs. More subtle, however, is the third level, which embraces culture change for high commitment. Here, training strategies are directed to the reconstruction of individuals so that they will accept organisational values as their own and define themselves in terms of the changing requirements of the organisation.

Based on unitarist logic, HRM is ‘based upon a consensus view of essential harmony’ of employee-organisation relations (Mabey et al. 1998: 41) which de-emphasises conflict (Bray, Deery, Walsh & Waring 2005; Petzel, Abbott & Timo 2003). Storey (1992) argues that this is often taken to the point where conflict is considered pathological and is attributed either to troublemakers or third parties interfering with the employer-employee relationship. Thus genuine conflict is not possible because there is a conjunction of interests between employer and employee. The pluralist view of employment relationship, on the other hand, regards conflict as not aberrant, but inevitable, due to incompatible differences in values and objectives (Bray et al. 2005; Legge 2005; Petzel et al. 2003). Thus the position taken in this paper is that conflict should be managed rather than denied. The other significant characteristic of SHRM is its link between top management and practising HR managers. Given its unitarist foundations, HR’s main concern with commitment is logically the extent to which
commitment will assist in achieving organisational goals, so that there is little scope for HR practitioners to represent the needs of workers. Indeed, any HR manager so doing would violate the strategic link between HRM and top management.

In theory, the unitarist foundations of HRM should have, by now, enhanced employee commitment. Regarding the natural state of the employment relationship as one of agreement, HRM had the potential, notionally at least, to augment the PM approach so that employees experience less feelings of isolation and have enhanced self-expression and control over their work. However, the claims of HRM proponents that it can engineer such outcomes, together with its unitarist assumptions, have been questioned and criticised for a number of years and which now appear flawed (Guest & Hoque 1994; Guest 1999; Legge 2005; Sisson 2001; Storey 2001).

The ‘soft’ model of HRM recognises both the imperatives of organisational results and worker-oriented outcomes such as quality of work life, employee well-being and commitment (Guest 1999; Thornhill & Saunders 1998; Worsfold 1999). Indeed, worker commitment is a fundamental constituent of soft HRM. Guest (1999: 6) noted that ‘only by winning the commitment of employees is it possible to achieve corporate goals’, and Sisson and Marginson (2003: 167) believed ‘…securing the commitment of individual employees … is at the heart of … HRM’.

The literature supporting the abovementioned practices argues that such approaches constitute high commitment, from which two common themes emerge. Firstly, there is a belief that commitment will result in behaviour which is largely self-regulated (as opposed to behaviour which is controlled by external endorsements and restrictions) and, secondly, that employees will repay trust and security with a strong emotional attachment to the organisation and its aims. It is disappointing that there is a lack of research evidence in support of these beliefs.

**HRM: CONCEPTS vs PRACTICES**

Although the literature advocating commitment-centred HRM is authoritative and convincing, it appears that many firms ignore the principles of such a model. Contrary to the academic rhetoric concerning the pursuit of committed workforces, the connection between workers and organisations
is being destroyed, at least in part by the practices mentioned earlier. In further contradiction to
academic argument, HRM emphasises the business role of the symbiotic relationship between HR
and top management (Donaldson 2007a; 2007b; 2007c; Wright & McMahan 1992). This brings into
question HR’s ability to satisfy management and employees simultaneously (Legge 2005; Truss et

Given the tensions and contradictions in the management of employee commitment, the management
of human resources is similarly troubled. At an abstract level, the literature espouses the corporate
and individual advantages arising from a high commitment and high trust environment provided by
‘soft’ HRM. In practice however, the unremitting shift towards ‘hard’ HRM appears to be a primary
cause of employee disassociation with the organisation. By seeking competitive advantage through
downsizing, cost-reducing technology, casualisation, and so forth, organisations regard employees as
a variable factor of production to be utilised with maximum economic efficiency.

The normative HRM assumption that worker commitment is natural to the employment relationship
can only hold so long as it operates in a context of relative consensus, job security and stability
(Price 2004), yet HRM is not generating such an environment. To the contrary, it is driven by
economic imperatives which secure commitment through managerial interventions and
discontinuous working arrangements (Fowler 1987; Price 2004). Is HRM unconsciously fostering an
environment in which employees no longer identify with organisational goals, values and activities?
Indeed, it may be asked whether, albeit unintentionally, HRM contributes to the alienation of many
workers. This is depicted in Figure 3 in which, due to the strong connection between HRM and
senior management, the emotional level of commitment may be moribund, leading to alienation.

Notwithstanding the above, it is simplistic and unfair to blame HR practitioners for the difficulties of
reduced employee commitment; although convenient, it rests on questionable assumptions. An
integral and necessary condition of HRM is the part it plays in major decisions at the top level in
organisations. Beer et al. (1984) argue that HRM should maximise outcomes for all stakeholders,
and Fombrun et al. (1984) emphasised HRM’s role in formulating business strategies. The
requirement of HR practitioners to implement long-term strategies for a committed workforce, with
its unitarist underpinnings (Guest 1987a; Storey 1992) can only happen if they have sufficient influence with top management. The reality of that influence may be flawed, however (Fisher & Dowling 1999). Firstly, HR is but one voice, and can be easily put to one side by senior personnel. Secondly, and perhaps more to the point, given the pressures of globalisation and market forces, the ‘niceties’ of HRM in its pure form may simply be untenable. It seems unfair, therefore, to criticise HRM for the commitment malaise. Although HR practitioners have access to a large body of research-based knowledge regarding employee commitment, higher level organisational constraints restrict its implementation. Thus the question remains whether HRM will ever be able to create the employee commitment which is expected of it. Some twenty years after the shift from PM to HRM, evidence suggests that workers today are no more committed to their employing organisation and, even more disturbing, commitment may have declined over the period.
CONCLUSIONS

The central claim of HRM is that, compared to PM, it offers a distinctive, and improved, approach to employer-employee relations. An essential element of that claim is the contribution it makes to employee commitment, and thus there is a long-standing interest in those theories and processes which contribute to enhancing commitment. Of particular concern is HRM’s inability to implement this knowledge in order to realise its potential. Although commitment is considered essential for optimum organisational performance, and various HRM models seem capable of contributing to these objectives, organisational focus on short-term, quantifiable strategies has neutralised such efforts. Through its emphasis on individualism and making unitary assumptions about the goals and interests of workers, HRM seems at odds in pluralistic societies and the current emphasis in management rhetoric on diversity.

Not only has HRM failed to deliver employee commitment, it seems that HR practitioners may have contributed to its decline. This is because the nature of the employer/employee relationship under HRM is logically not possible to alter. This is not to deny that its goals seek to achieve outcomes which would bring with it individual well-being, organisational effectiveness and societal well-being (Beer et al. 1984), however, the unitarist-driven HRM model, as applied, has shortcomings in generating commitment; indeed, this paper argues that feelings of organisational commitment and identification are diminished due to the dysfunctional consequences of HR practices.
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