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The nature of the psychological contract for ongoing and fixed term
volunteers: A review and research agenda.

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ABSTRACT

There is a large body of literature dealing with the psychological contract, with a focus on organisational commitment and job satisfaction. This literature mainly deals with ongoing, fixed term and casual employees, and ongoing and episodic volunteers. The important and growing area of volunteers engaged for a fixed period has largely been neglected. In this paper a review of relevant literature is provided, and an agenda for comparative research into the psychological contract of fixed terms and ongoing volunteers is proposed.

Keywords: Not for Profit, not for profit management, not for profit human resources, volunteering.

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INTRODUCTION

Volunteers are a particularly interesting group to study in terms of the psychological contract because they are not bound to the organizations they 'work' for by the usual ties of employment.' (Nicholls, 2013, p. 987)

According to Cullinane and Dundon (2006), psychological contract literature has 'blossomed progressively... to the extent that it is now firmly located within the 'lexicon of the Human Resource Management discipline' (p. 113). Psychological contract research has predominately been related to employees but, increasingly, there is a strong interest amongst researchers and practitioners in volunteers using the psychological contract as a measure.

A review of the literature focused on the psychological contract of employees largely deal with 'traditional volunteers' or ongoing volunteers who 'come to their assignment on a stable and regulated schedule once a week or once a month for a prescribed number of hours' (Macduff, 2006 p. 33). There is also some research comparing fixed term and ongoing employees (Schalk et al, 2010).

There is an increasing interest in volunteers (Farmer & Fedor, 1999, 2001; Taylor et al., 2006; Starnes, 2007; Caldwell et al., 2008; Nichols & Ojola, 2009). This literature predominantly deals with those engaged on an ongoing basis. The literature does not appear to address fixed term volunteers; and, by extension, does not seem to contemplate those engaged for an extended period where the organization determines the period of the contract and the volunteer hours. This approach appears to differ from literature dealing with 'episodic' volunteers whereby the allocation of volunteer hours is largely based on the individual needs of the volunteer (Macduff, 1990; Hustinz, Haski-Leventhal, and Handy 2008). The literature also does not appear to address a comparison of volunteers engaged on a fixed term and ongoing basis, in particular, the differences in their organizational commitment and job satisfaction and using the psychological contract approach as a measure.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Articles dealing with social exchange theory, employees and volunteer psychological contracts, their organizational commitment and job satisfaction; and the concept of episodic volunteering are discussed.

Social exchange theory

According to Schalk et al (2010) social exchange theory suggests that, together ‘with economic considerations, social expectations are relevant for an employee’ in an employment relationship and this means that it is not only the formal contract of employment that categorizes this relationship (p. 93). Pauline (2011) concludes that, in the volunteering relationship, the social exchange theory provides a useful context ‘for considering both positive and negative experiences (p. 22) whilst Coyle-Shapiro and Parzefall (2008) reveal that studies on social exchange theory share ‘some common elements with psychological contract theory’ including that both parties view the exchange relationship ‘as comprising tangible and intangible resources governed by the norm of reciprocity’ (p. 8). Farmer & Fedor (1999) also find that not for profit organizations participate in ‘social exchange’ relationships with volunteers (p. 352) and ‘offer little in the way of remuneration or tangible benefits, perceiving support from the organization in the form of recognition as being valued’ (p. 355).

Employees: Psychological contract

Most of the literature dealing with the psychological contract has been on permanent employees or ongoing employees, generally focussing on expectations (Guest, Conway & Briner, 1996; Rousseau, 1989, 1990, 1995, 2004; Schalk & Roe, 2007), and contract fulfilment and breach (Parzefall & Coyle-Shapiro, 2011; Rayton & Yalabik, 2014; Robinson & Brown, 2004; Robinson & Rousseau, 1994). Rousseau (1989) explains that the psychological contract represents ‘an individual’s beliefs regarding the terms and conditions of a reciprocal exchange agreement between that focal person and another party’ (p. 123) and later, ‘a set of unwritten reciprocal expectations between an individual and the organization’ (Rousseau, 1995, p. 22). Guest, Conway, and Briner (1996) further define the psychological contract as concerning ‘assumptions, expectations, promises, and mutual

obligations between employees and their employer' (p. 279).

Flexible employment contracts

Some research on the psychological contract focuses on flexible employment arrangements include fixed term engagements (De Witte et al., 2008; Guest, 2004; Guest, Isaksson, & De Witte, 2010; Isaksson, 2006). Guest, Isaksson, and De Witte (2010) refer to the growth of 'international trade and competition' and of 'new technology ... affecting changes in the traditional employment relationship' that has realised an increasing economic and industrial focus on flexible employment arrangements (pp. 3-5). Schalk et al. (2010) find that, unlike ongoing employees, fixed term employees have 'narrower psychological contracts', that is, they include 'fewer promises and obligations' (p. 103) and, as a result, they 'report a greater degree of fulfilment' and 'experience less violation of the psychological contract' (p. 105).

Employees: Organization commitment and job satisfaction

Armstrong (2009) cites Guest, Conway, and Briner (1996) who stress that an employee's positive psychological contract is worth taking seriously because it is strongly linked to 'higher job satisfaction and commitment' (p. 285). There is a substantial body of psychological contract literature concerning employee organizational commitment. Porter, Steers, Mowday, and Boulian (1974) describe this commitment as the 'strength of an individual's identification and involvement', which can generally be characterized by 'strong belief in and acceptance of the organization's goals and values', 'a willingness to exert considerable effort on behalf of the organization', and 'a definite desire to maintain organizational membership' (p. 604). Schalk and Roe (2007) affirm that the presence of the psychological contract suggests 'a certain state of commitment' that includes a willingness to undertake work activities and 'to carry them out in accordance with certain standards' (p.168).

An extensive body of literature also deals with employee job satisfaction. Locke (1976) describes it as 'a pleasurable or positive emotional state resulting from the appraisal of one's job or job experiences' (p. 1304) while Harter and Schmidt (2002) conclude that employee satisfaction and engagement are related to meaningful business outcomes (p. 276).

There are also key findings in psychological contract research that address comparisons between ongoing and fixed term employee job satisfaction and commitment. Guest (2004) notes that

findings in these two areas may differ depending on whether or not an employee has a 'contract of choice' or 'preferred' employment contract (p. 7), while Isaksson (2006) finds that empirical evidence shows 'mixed results' and 'no clear support' for the 'common assumption' that fixed term employees are less satisfied than ongoing employees (p. 11). This finding is supported by De Cuyper, De Witte, Krausz, Mohr, and Rigotti (2010) who, together with Jose (2008), make similar findings in terms of commitment between fixed term and ongoing employees, with a higher job satisfaction rate of fixed term employees (p. 74). McDonald and Makin (2000) find that levels of commitment amongst fixed term employees are 'significantly higher than those of ongoing employees with the 'emerging, counterintuitive', nature of these findings being 'reinforced by the finding that job satisfaction is also significantly higher among fixed term employees (p. 88). Their highly positive results, however, may reflect the context of their research that concerned employees in 'a large holiday sector organisation' (p. 84).

Volunteers

Research associated with the psychological contract theoretical framework is increasingly being applied to volunteers (Farmer & Fedor, 1999, 2001; Liao-Troth, 2001, 2005; Thompson & Blunderson, 2003; Taylor et al., 2006; Starnes, 2007; Caldwell et al., 2008; Nichols & Ojola, 2009; Odonohue & Nelson, 2009). Whilst many of the findings are similar in employee contexts, there are identified differences that are driven by the nature of the volunteer setting. The obvious difference between volunteers and employees is that the former do not receive remuneration for the work they perform. For example, Farmer and Fedor (1999) observe that a not for profit organization participates in 'social exchange' relationships with volunteers (p. 352) meaning that they 'promise to offer certain inducements to volunteers (e.g. recognition)'. In return, the organization expects that the volunteers make certain contributions, with these mutual obligations forming the psychological contract (p. 355). These writers also conclude that from close investigation of the differences and similarities of employees and volunteers, the 'psychological contract construct now appears to be cross-cultural and applicable to a broad range of working relationships' including volunteering.

Episodic volunteers

There is also an increasing focus of literature on the 'episodic volunteers' (Auld, 2004; Bryan &

Madden, 2006; Handy, Brodeur & Cnaan 2006; Hustinz, Haski-Leventhal & Handy 2008; Macduff, 1990; Styers, 2004). Hustinz, Haski-Leventhal, and Handy (2008) find that volunteering is an increasingly varied activity, with conventional 'long-term and regular volunteering being supplemented (and potentially interchanged) with volunteer activities that are undertaken on an ad hoc basis and even as a one-time event' (p. 51). According to Auld (2004, 10), 'modern volunteers seem more likely to prefer a short one-off involvement, possibly on a regular or repeat basis' (p. 10). This is supported by Styers (2004) who argues that 'episodic volunteering has become the biggest change in volunteering' in recent times (p. 85). Handy, Brodeur, and Cnaan (2006) identify such categories as 'Long Term Committed Volunteers', 'Habitual Episodic Volunteers' and 'Genuine Episodic Volunteers' who undertake work associated with various community festivals and cultural events (Handy, Brodeur & Cnaan 2006, pp. 33-34). Macduff (1990) defines episodic volunteering as 'service of a short duration' performed on a once-only basis or work on a specific project or assignment that recurs annually (p.15). However, the literature dealing with episodic volunteers does not seem to concern volunteers who are engaged on a fixed term or ongoing basis. Further, this literature does not seem to deal with volunteer contracts based on organizational needs that commit volunteers for a specific period and volunteer hours.

Organization commitment and job satisfaction

New emphases and themes are emerging in the literature on the psychological contract and volunteers, with focuses on expectations (Schalk & Roe, 2007; Guest, Isaksson, & De Witte, 2010), volunteer commitment (Bang, Ross, & Reio, 2013; Boezeman & Ellemers, 2007, 2008; Cnaan, & Cascio, 1998; Vecina, Chacón, Suerio & Barron 2012; Vecina, Chacón, Marzana, & Marta, 2013), and volunteer job satisfaction (Al-Mutawa & Maged Ali 2012; Bang, Ross, & Reio, 2013; Boezeman & Ellemers, 2009; Ferriera, M. R., Proenca & Proenca, J. F. 2012; Schalk & Roe 2007; Vecina, Chacon, Suerio, & Barron, 2012). Boezeman and Ellemers (2008), for example, find that 'theoretical notions about pride and respect can be used to understand the organizational commitment of workers in volunteer organizations (p. 169). Cnaan and Cascio (1998) observe that volunteers have 'a moral and emotional commitment to their organizations (p. 3) while Ferriera, Proenca, T., and Proenca, J. F. (2012) note that the mainstream of the research on volunteers agree that job satisfaction plays a

significant role ‘in voluntary behaviour’ (p. 6). Boezeman and Ellemers (2009) demonstrate that ‘satisfaction of autonomy needs’ and connectedness rather than ‘satisfaction of competence needs’ are pertinent to volunteers’ job satisfaction and of their intentions to remain (p. 910). In addressing volunteer retention, Bryen and Madden (2006) refer to other studies which indicate that factors such as ‘an individual’s attitude to their volunteering, the amount of satisfaction or dissatisfaction experienced by the volunteer’ and their psychological contract expectations ‘being met or not can play a role in determining their commitment to the organization’ (p. 7). There does not appear to be research articles comparing organizational commitment and job satisfaction between fixed term and ongoing volunteers.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Outcomes of this research may find that fixed term volunteering overall appears to be the subject of limited research. Research also appears to neglect the issue of volunteers engaged where the period of contract and hours are dictated by the organization. In general terms, comparisons of fixed term and ongoing volunteer organizational commitment and job satisfaction will depend upon the appropriateness and applicability of organization’s volunteer policies and their implementation; the level and adequacy of initial and ongoing training and guidance; the adequacy of practical organizational support and feedback; and the level of supervision.

Research on fixed term volunteering appears to be a neglected area that includes volunteers with the period of the contract and volunteer hours specified by the organization. There is also a lack of studies comparing psychological contracts of fixed term volunteers and those engaged on an ongoing basis particularly in regard to their organizational commitment and job satisfaction. These gaps suggest that there are opportunities for future research.

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