Sheffield Hallam University

Investigating the Influencers and Outcomes of Organizational Commitment in Sheffield City Region's Small Business Using a Mixed-Method Approach

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Abstract

This case study takes the reader through the multiple methods approach that was adopted for the research project "Influencers and Consequences of Organisational Commitment Within Sheffield City Region's mid-sized businesses." Quantitative (questionnaires) and qualitative (semi-structured, one-on-one interviews) were combined to answer the research question. The questionnaire was developed from an existing tool to measure organizational commitment, and the interviews were designed to dig deeper into the topic of commitment. The limitations and benefits of each approach are explored and the process of combining two styles of data is also considered.

Learning Outcomes

By the end of this case, students should be able to

- Evaluate the natural limitations of published research and how researchers might build upon existing theory
- Understand the terms quantitative and qualitative and appreciate the boundaries of each method
- Appreciate the benefits of mixed-methods approaches and why researcher might combine multiple research methods
- Investigate why researchers might work with case

organizations and the benefits that arise with such an approach.

Introduction and Context

In 2015, I was working for a large multi-national organization in the Sheffield City Region (SCR); I had worked there for 9 years and had enjoyed my time there very much. However, toward the end something changed, and I no longer felt the same way about the company; this ultimately led me to resign from the company and begin a PhD. The company built Steel Mill equipment and supplied spare parts to the same industry, and I was responsible for international development of key accounts, particularly in South America.

The context for steel making has changed significantly over the last several years, from a United Kingdom, and Sheffield focus as major players in the world Steel industry (and hence the company I worked for being based in Sheffield), to the company only having a handful of customers in the United Kingdom. This led the company to serve a primarily international market. In addition, the company had benefited significantly from a decade of investment in Chinese Steel, meaning that most major cities in China now had their own steel-making facilities. This was

excellent for China, while the internal economy was growing and while there was a high demand for Steel, however by 2015, the internal Chinese market had slowed down significantly leading Chinese steel makers to consider international export options. This had wide reaching impact on world Steel as Chinese steel-makers could often supply Steel to Western counterparts more cheaply than their local competitors could manufacture the same product (to the same international specifications meaning local producers could only differentiate on price or service). This issue has only intensified in recent times with the United States' attempts to safeguard American jobs through Donald Trump's enforcement of tariffs on Steel imports (Inman, 2018).

This shake up of the world Steel market had wide reaching impact on the industry, Chinese exports were capturing international markets that once served in domestic markets and second-tier suppliers such as the company I worked for were facing the challenge that new plants were not being built. This caused a significant slowdown in the company that I worked for and changed their mission, from Steel Mill design and spare parts supply, to general maintenance services. This was a significant deviation from the company's core competencies

and caused great frustration internally.

These factors and the pessimism in the wider industry caused my aforementioned resignation and commitment to begin a PhD. Owing to my experiences at work, and change in my commitment to my employer I chose the topic of organizational commitment. I wanted to understand more about what employee commitment means, essentially by asking the question, what commits an employee to their employer? Or what causes a lack of commitment between employee and employer? I was hoping to better understand the context of commitment, the factors that influenced commitment and its associated outcomes. In the developmental stages, I even wondered whether commitment still existed at all in a "post-job-for-life" environment.

What Was Already Known?

The literature in organizational commitment is well developed and considered mature by academic standards, in fact commitment has been of academic interest for at least 50 years (Ashman, 2007; Cantril, 1963; O'Reilly, Chatman, & Caldwell, 1991; Steers, 1977; Wiener, 1982). Over time, the topic of commitment has grown from commitment to a particular focus

such as religion or family (Singh, Gupta, & Venugopal, 2008) to commitment to organizations (Meyer & Allen, 1991), and the term organizational commitment was born.

This assumes in title if nothing else that an employee's primary commitment will be to their organization. Mowday (1979) defined commitment as being between an employee and their employer and satisfying three primary criteria;

1. A strong belief in the organizations goals and values;
2. A willingness to exert considerable effort on behalf of the organization;
3. A strong desire to maintain membership in the organization.

Other academics were more pessimistic in their definition and described commitment as the process of trapping employees in an organization through benefits, and making employees feel the need to remain. Weiner (1982) was more upbeat, claiming that commitment was a relationship of loyalty between employer. From these early theories, Meyer and Allen (1993) created their popular and well-respected measure of organizational commitment, the total commitment questionnaire (TCM). The TCM is a questionnaire that measures three types

of commitment and borrows from the theory described above, affective commitment in line with Mowday's (1979) positive commitment style, continuance commitment (CC) in line with Becker's (1960) side bet theory and normative commitment (NC) that is based on Wiener's loyalty based theory.

The questionnaire remains a popular tool to measure commitment and has been heavily cited by academics interested in the same (Google, 2018). However, the limitations of commitment research are that most theory has been developed in North America, and tested with public-sector employees (Mowday, Steers, & Porter, 1979), nurses (Krestainiti & Prezerakos, 2014), or students (Meyer & Herscovitch, 2001). I strongly question the validity of asking students to complete a questionnaire that assesses employee commitment.

Furthermore, as I quickly learned, the literature in commitment serves mainly to answer the question—are employees committed, and what kind of commitment do they experience? As opposed to asking how or why they are committed? Ghosh and Swamy (2014) and Singh and Gupta (2008) noticed this and commented that there is a lack of research that considers

the influencers and outcomes of organizational commitment. Why are employees committed? Are employees committed? If they are committed, so what? What are the outcomes of commitment?

This issue is compounded when the limited context and sample (public sector, nurses and students) for commitment research is considered. How could I be sure these people felt the same way as people in the SCR and the United Kingdom? This became the foundation for this research project, and I was tasked with developing a research design that could begin to answer this question.

Research Design

In line with my prior experiences at work and the limitations observed in the literature review, I decided that the only way to understand what influenced an employee's commitment would be to speak to employees directly. To achieve this, I approached organizations in the SCR from different economic sectors and who were members of the Sheffield Chamber of Commerce and Industry. Furthermore, as most commitment research had been conducted with large public-sector organizations, I chose to work with smaller organizations because they were

underrepresented in the literature and had the most potential to reveal something new. Often, in such approaches, researchers will quickly turn to small- to medium-sized business (or SMEs) as a suitable sample to represent "small businesses but I quickly learned that this sample was unsuitable." I know that 99% of business in the United Kingdom are classified as SMEs, however of these, 98% of those organizations are either micro-businesses (that employ fewer than 10 employees), represent self-employed workers (i.e., one employee) or organizations that have zero employees (i.e., a holding company or similar) (GOV.UK, 2017). Therefore, I decided to work with mid-sized business (MSB) defined as an organization with a turnover of more than £10 million and/or more than 20 employees (GOV.UK, 2017). In total 23 MSBs were contacted in line with a purposive sample approach. A purposive sample is a sample of organizations (in this case) that is purposively chosen by the researcher because it will help answer the research question and objectives (Bryman, 2016). In this case, they were MSBs in the SCR.

Of the 23 organizations contacted, several declined to participate because they were either "too busy" or "due to the current economic environment." Others requested more

information and five organizations asked to meet me for more information. In the end, three organizations agreed to participate in the research project, one professional football club, one heavy metals equipment supplier that was similar to the organization where the researcher had previously worked, and one international import and export organization. I was happy that this sample represented a diverse sample of organizations that was broadly representative of the SCR. I had purposively avoided selecting three organizations in the same business. Once the sample was agreed, I was tasked with designing a suitable research design to achieve the overall projects goals.

I began to consider how I could understand the commitment of employees and how I could be sure of their commitment levels. I knew that there would have been little point in investigating what influenced the commitment levels of employees if I did not know if they were committed or not, and that developing an understanding of what led to commitment would come from speaking to employees. This pulled me toward the adoption of multiple methods as I knew from the literature review that there was a lack of research in influencers and outcomes of commitment, but there was good theory and tools to measure

current commitment levels.

The concept of mixed methods has often been described as an approach that uses more than one method of data collection, but academics have not fully agreed on its definition (see: Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009). Bryman (1994) described mixed methods as an approach that makes use of at least one quantitative and qualitative method within a single study. I have already spoken of the problems associated with current commitment research and that it has been developed in North America and tested using questionnaires within a limited population that sometimes includes students. The aim of this approach is to go deeper and understand the underlying questions of what commits employees, and what outcomes can be expected from this commitment.

I realized the value of mixed methods at this point, and that current research that positioned an employee's commitment could be useful to my project as a starting point (i.e., the TCM). This was because I could not interview employees and ask them about their commitment before I knew how committed they were. For these reasons, I decided that the way to investigate the influencers and outcomes of commitment began

with questionnaire testing and interviews with employees to understand their lived experiences within an organization.

I went back to the literature to find Meyer and Allen's (1991) TCM questionnaire, but quickly realized that the questionnaire itself was not included in any of their academic papers. This confused me greatly as I would have expected that a paper introducing a new questionnaire would include the questionnaire itself in the publication. The questionnaire was also missing from their revision of the TCM scale paper (1993), and their updated and developed TCM scale paper (1997) I eventually found a copy of the questionnaire in Meyer and Allen's (2004) TCM academic user guide (which is not a research paper in itself, but a guide for anyone wishing to use the questionnaire in a practical way). I then adapted the TCM questionnaire for my own purposes, including updating the wording to suit each case organizations and for use online (as this was not an option in the landscape of a pre-Internet age when the questionnaire was developed). At the end of the questionnaire, I also asked each employee if they were willing to volunteer for an interview at a later date.

Once the questionnaire had been created, I began to consider

how I might begin to understand what influences commitment within the mixed-method tradition, it was clear that I would be required to integrate a qualitative approach into the research, and due to the nature of the project, where a commitment relationship might be personal, a private interview was deemed most suitable. In line with the research aim to understand commitment more deeply, I was clear that I did not have all the answers and needed the participants to explain their experiences in a way that was not restrictive. This ruled out structured interviews where I would ask a sequence of fixed questions, and as I needed to keep the participants on track and discussing relevant topics un-structured interviews were also ruled out. This left semi-structured interviews, an approach that allowed the participant to explain their experience while I could keep them on track and answering the research question as necessary.

Saunders (2016) argues that between 15 and 60 interviews is a suitable number for research in the qualitative tradition and as I was using more than one method of data collection (i.e., questionnaires and interviews), I decided to lean toward the mid-point number of interviews. In total, 38 interviews were completed.

Practicalities of Case Research

The decision to work with organizations in the SCR was worthwhile as it allowed for a real-world context and undoubtedly improved the quality of the results of the wider project. However, the process of combining academic research with a real-world context was often challenging. This began immediately after the organization agreed to participate in the research project and I prepared to begin data collection.

In a practical sense, I was ready to begin the process of data collection with all three companies in September 2016. However, the time taken to check the questionnaire with all three organizations, and other work commitments on their side delayed this process greatly. I learned quickly that any research activity in a real organization would essentially be low very priority over the course of normal business. This means that any internal issue (such as computer problems experienced by the Football Club or a mistake with a large customer for the import business) pushed the start data of the data collection backwards. Furthermore, once Christmas approached, all three organizations asked if they could pause the project until after the break. This problem was compounded further when the

organizations were still not ready to start again after Christmas. Overall, this back and forth between the organizations and myself delayed the project by at least 20 weeks.

Once these issues had been resolved and I began to collect the data, the benefits of working with organizations became clearer. As I was interviewing several staff in each location, I was spending an extensive period inside each business (sometimes a week or more). This helped me to learn the surface culture of each organization and contributed to my early understanding of the findings of the project. Furthermore, once I was inside the organization and speaking to employees, it was easy to build relationships and ask the employees for further staff that I could interview (i.e., an employee who had left their name on the questionnaire could ask his colleagues to attend an interview). This approach was successful, and this is likely because the employee was able to convince their colleagues to participate, while telling them that it would be a straightforward process. This process of seeking new participants from your existing sample is often referred to as snowballing.

Further to these practical considerations, the ethical considerations were always on the mind of the researcher.

This was straightforward that questionnaire responses would be anonymized and not passed on to others or used in an identifiable format, and that any direct quotations used in publications would be anonymized. I also agreed to provide each interview participant with a copy of the interview transcript for their information.

Methods in Action

To carry out this investigation, I adopted a mixed method, two phased approach that followed the traditions of a neo-empiricist approach (subjectivity on the part of the subject and objectivity of the researcher) (Johnson & Duberley, 2000). In the first phase an adapted version of the respected TCM, OC questionnaire as developed by Meyer and Allen (1991, 1993). The questionnaire sought volunteers for a follow up interview by asking the question "would you be willing to attend a follow up interview?" If the participant agreed, they were able to leave their email address or phone number. In the second phase, the researcher conducted semi-structured, one-on-one interviews with the same volunteers from the questionnaire. This approach to collecting mixed-method data where one style of data serves to inform another is described by Creswell and Clark (2011)

as exploratory sequential design (see: Bryman, 2016; Creswell, 2009; Hesse-Biber, 2010; Hesse-Biber & Johnson, 2015).

The questionnaire was collected from all three case organizations and analyzed using Microsoft Excel in the traditions recommended by Meyer and Allen (2004). On the most part this meant calculating the mean scores of each commitment style from the seven point scale as provided in the TCM (Meyer & Allen, 2004). In total, 160 questionnaires were completed, and 13 were discarded through incompletion, this left a usable sample of 147 questionnaires (60 from the football club, 37 from the import organization and 50 from the metals processing business). Aside from the delay in beginning the data collection described earlier, the questionnaire phase of data collection was straightforward and without issue. Upon reflection, the ease of questionnaire research and separation between the researcher and the participants also lends itself to the potentially sensitive nature of employees discussing their commitment. This likely explains the popularity of questionnaires in research projects of this type.

The second phase I conducted semi-structured, face-to-face, one-on-one interviews (see: Kvale, 2015) and this was more

complicated despite the fact that most employees had already volunteered to be interviewed. I contacted each volunteer with a proposed time and date for the interview; attempting to group them as closely together as possible (two of the organizations were at least 40 min away in a car). However, this was often not practical for the participants themselves and the researcher ended up arranging almost all interviews individually and on different days. This resulted in the data collection taking longer than anticipated and is a limitation of qualitative research and possibly a reason why researchers in commitment have favored questionnaires.

Once the interviews were underway, they revealed rich information that served to answer the research question and objectives. The benefits of semi-structured interviews were that it enabled the researcher to press certain questions more than others depending on the person, or move past questions that were not providing the same depth and quality of answers. For example, the question "what does a committed employee look like in your opinion?" I had high hopes that this would significantly contribute to answering the research question, but most employees replied with similar answers "someone that goes the extra mile," "not afraid to stay late," and "working

hard for the company." Once five or six interviews had been completed, and the question was found to provide little quality and depth, I stopped asking the question and this would not have been possible in other approaches.

Other questions that I had anticipated as being "warm up" questions provided the most depth of all, for example, the opening statement of "Thanks for agreeing to participate in this interview, let's get started, just tell me about your role here, what you do—how long have you been doing it?" This question, perhaps through informal nature, or because it clearly had no "correct" answer was the most useful question to learn about the employees and their experience at work. In fact, in one case, this was the only question that I asked for the whole interview, as the participant responded:

> So, can I tell you the story? Right, OK—let me tell you the story, and it brings my life into it and this place more than anything. (Participant 4)

I was pleased with the flexibility that the qualitative interviews provided and the flexibility that such an approach offered. It was clear that some employees were happy to discuss their experiences at length and others wished to reply to a direct

question, some interviews lasted for over 2 hr and others lasted for only 11 min. As I progressed, I learned not to push employees who were not willing to speak, and be grateful for whatever they were saying. As I was often able to compare the results of the questionnaire (i.e., their commitment scores) to the interview, I was able to draw some interesting conclusions from commitment levels and employees interest and awareness for what was going on at their employer. For example one employee who scored as uncommitted was 15 min late to her interview, did not acknowledge that she was late and did not provide any meaningful answers to the questions asked. The reply to the question; do you feel a personal connection to the club?

> I haven't got a personal connection no, maybe if I were
> [a fan of this club], or interested. (Participant 7)

The overall quality of the research method came from using more than one method to complement each other in line with a mixed approach and exploratory sequential design (Creswell & Clark, 2011). If I had only used interviews then I would have not known anything about the employees commitment before I interviewed them. If I had only used the questionnaire then

I would not have learned anything about why people are committed, or be able to compare the self-reported data to the employees attitude and experiences at work.

Practical Lessons Learned

The methods that were adopted for this research project significantly influenced the overall outcome of the project itself and by nature, the overall findings. I quickly learned that different methods of data collection suited different types of results. In the case of quantitative data, it often serves to confirm the ideas of a researcher. For example, in this case, I issued the TCM questionnaire to check if the employees were committed or not. Once I had this answer, I could have written a paper about the commitment levels of employees in the SCR, and I would have completed a deductive piece of work. Alternatively, qualitative approaches lend themselves more toward building theory or attempting to understand something in more detail, this is often spoken about as *Vershten* (a German word meaning "to understand"). In the case of this project, I attempted to understand what commitment means to employees in the region through asking them about their experiences. Burrell and Morgan's (1979) research project into

the Fire Services supports this argument and demonstrates in an effective way how different research methods lend themselves to different types of results.

The use of multiple methods helped me to reach further than I might have been able to using any single method alone. In an approach with only questionnaire testing then I could have only answered known questions using a well-tested questionnaire. In an approach where I only used interviews then I would have known nothing about the commitment of the employee before the interview, meaning that it would have taken longer to get to know the employee and their experiences. It was through merging both methods in line with the research aim and objectives that helped to answer the research question and objectives, and proximity to the case organizations through such an approach that enabled understanding of what was happening in each case organization. Both Bryman (2016) and Creswell and Clark (2011) provide an excellent overview of the mixed methods that are available, including the approach taken here where quantitative data serves to inform qualitative data to build theory.

Furthermore, in line with many researchers' arguments that

qualitative data do not achieve the same rigor of data as quantitative approaches, the mixed approach adopted helped avoid this issue and to answer questions of rigor in data collection. Guba and Lincoln (1994) argue that rigor can be achieved in four stages: internal validity (isomorphism of findings with reality), external validity (generalizability), reliability (in the sense of stability), and objectivity (distanced and neutral observer). In this case, the researcher was attempting to generalize to theory as opposed to a population in line with Myers (2000) argument that small-scale research in the qualitative tradition is not strengthened by its ability to generalize to a population, but to theory itself, hence external validity and generalizability refers to theory as opposed to the wider population.

This was achieved through research design; internal validity was tested through comparing the results of the questionnaires to the interview data to check if both sets of data were comparable, this is often spoken about as "triangulation" of data. External validity was achieved through comparing the results of each case organization to each other and the literature in commitment. Objectivity was achieved through the researchers distance to each case organization, comparison

between cases and through not making assumptions as to what the results of the project might be. Objectivity was also achieved through the researcher's supervisors coding a sample of three interviews alongside his coding; this helped to achieve improved separation between the researcher and his participants. Finally, and as discussed, generalizability was achieved through comparing the results to known theory and literature, in this case the TCM questionnaire and positioning the research findings within it.

Conclusion

The purpose of this case has been to provide an overview of the research methods used in an attempt to answer the question; what commits an employee to their employer? Or what causes a lack of commitment between employee and employer?

To achieve this, I began to investigate the literature in the area and found it to be primarily answering a different question and that this was a limitation of the research methods that were favored by current commitment researchers.

I provided an overview for the research methods that were adopted and the reasons why they were the most suitable

methods to answer the research question. Furthermore, as I had an invested interest in the research topic and had experience a shift in my own commitment levels, I worked hard to reduce any bias from the part of the researcher. This was achieved through working with multiple separate cases, comparing the results of each case to one another and comparing multiple sources of data to each other to paint a richer picture of the topic under investigation.

Exercises and Discussion Questions

1. How did the approach of using more than one method influence the overall data collection process?
2. How could this approach to investigate commitment within the context of the Sheffield City Region be expanded in other regions?
3. What were the main obstacles to earlier researchers in commitment research, why has qualitative research of this style taken so long?
4. How else might the researcher have collected data to answer the same question?
5. Explain the value in using mixed methods as an approach to collect data.

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