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ILR Impact Brief - Affective
Commitment Links Human Resource
Practices and Voluntary Turnover

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IMPACT BRIEF

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Affective Commitment Links Human Resource Practices and Voluntary Turnover

Research question: Does group-level “affective commitment” influence the link between motivation-, empowerment-, and skill-enhancing human resource practices and aggregate voluntary turnover?

Conclusion: Motivation- and empowerment-enhancing human resource (HR) practices are positively associated with employees’ collective emotional attachment to, and identification with, a company and its goals; this affective commitment, in turn, is negatively associated with the aggregate of employee decisions to exit an organization. Thus, collective affective commitment mediates the relationship between these two sets of HR practices and voluntary turnover. Practices that enhance workforce skills, however, are not mediated by collective affective commitment; rather, they are directly and positively associated with increased voluntary turnover.

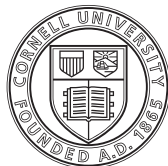
Workplace impact: Human resource practices aimed at enhancing employee motivation, empowerment, and skills are differentially related to employees’ decisions to exit—or remain with—a company. Knowing this, HR managers can choose the practices associated with the desired outcome, be it less or more voluntary turnover. The findings suggest that managers desiring to minimize voluntary departures should implement practices that boost employee motivation and empowerment. The independent and positive connection between enhanced

skills and higher turnover underscores the importance of both the human capital and psychological components of HR systems.

Abstract: Empirical evidence suggests that HR systems affect performance at the individual, group, and organizational level. Practices that define these systems aim to influence employees’ thinking, attitudes, and behavior (motivation); their skills and ability (skill); and their contributions to the group and organization (empowerment). Researchers also know that turnover is associated with effectiveness, so that higher amounts of churn within the workforce generally accompany lower levels of organizational performance. Turnover, then, is an intermediate performance outcome, one that researchers assert is related to, and can be managed through, human resource practices. But the channel through which those practices actually affect turnover is somewhat murky.

This study argues that affective commitment at the group level is a mediating link between HR systems and aggregate voluntary turnover. It builds on the theoretical literature, which postulates that organizational commitment is an antecedent of individual voluntary turnover and a mediator between human resource practices and decisions to exit an organization. The authors extrapolate the individual level associations to the aggregate level based on data derived from surveys of employees at a large food service company, where each business unit has authority to develop its own HR systems and practices. A different survey instrument gathered data from HR managers to test the conjecture that workers’ collective feelings of attachment to an organi-

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zation is one pathway through which HR practices that boost motivation, empowerment, and skill affect aggregate turnover. The underlying theory here is that collective attitudes help shape group norms and behaviors (e.g., quitting or remaining with the organization).

To begin, the researchers assessed the relationship between collective affective commitment (the hypothesized mediator) and aggregate voluntary turnover. They found support for existing research showing the two variables are negatively associated; that is, turnover falls as commitment rises, and vice versa.

Next, they focused on the connection between HR practices that motivate, empower, and build human capital and aggregate affective commitment. Here they found that motivation- and empowerment-enhancing practices are positively associated with collective affective commitment (commitment rises with more of these practices, and falls in their absence). Practices that build skill (i.e., human capital), on the other hand, may have a two-pronged effect: company-sponsored training may strengthen employees' commitment if they perceive it as a positive statement about their value to the company; or, it could give them the confidence and expertise to search for and find work at another organization. Indeed, the data revealed that skill-enhancing HR practices are not positively associated with the mediating variable (collective affective commitment).

With these results in hand, the researchers asked whether affective commitment actually mediates the relationship between turnover and HR practices that enhance motivation, empowerment, and skills. Analysis of the data shows that commitment does mediate between

empowerment and motivation practices and voluntary quits. Moreover, each of these HR practices is negatively associated with turnover. Skill-enhancing HR practices, however, are directly and positively associated with voluntary turnover; the relationship is not mediated by affective commitment.

In sum, the research confirms past findings indicating a negative relationship between affective commitment and voluntary turnover but unexpectedly found that organizational investments in human capital are not associated with stronger organizational attachment but with greater voluntary exits.

Methodology: Field work conducted in late 1999 entailed a survey that measured the affective commitment of 1,748 employees (10.4% of the total workforce) from 93 work groups nested in 33 business units of a food service company and another survey of 31 HR managers concerning HR practices. A follow-up survey in 2000 involved 37 HR managers who provided data on HR practices and voluntary turnover. Statistical techniques were used to analyze the survey data.

Source document: A working paper, "The Impact of Human Resource Policies on Aggregate Voluntary Turnover: A Test of Affective Organizational Commitment as a Consistent and Inconsistent Mediator" is under review.

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