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The Effects of Variable Work Arrangements on the Organizational Commitment of Contingent Workers

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Abstract

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Keywords

work, workers, traditional, pay, job, satisfaction, commitment, organizations

Comments

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This paper has not undergone formal review or approval of the faculty of the ILR School. It is intended to make results of Center research available to others interested in preliminary form to encourage discussion and suggestions.

ABSTRACT

Drawing on social exchange theory and research on organizational commitment, we developed a model of contingent workers' commitment to two foci: their hiring agencies and the organizations to which they have been assigned. Hypotheses were tested using survey data from 197 contingent workers. We found that commitment to the hiring agency was positively related to pay satisfaction and perceived organizational support from the agency. Commitment to the client organization was positively related to perceived organizational support from the client, co-worker relations, and job satisfaction. Preference for contingent work exhibited a positive relationship with pay and job satisfaction. Holding job and pay satisfaction constant, we found that commitment was negatively related to preference for contingent work. Of the factors studied, perceived organizational support exhibited the largest effect. Implications for theory and practice are discussed.

The recent and much-discussed trend among US firms toward increasing the use of contingent workers signals a profound change in the employment relationship (duRivage, 1992; Steverson, 1997). In the past, most American workers believed that they had an implicit agreement with their employers that “If the company was profitable, if the company was basically making it, and the workers were working diligently, then the workers would have a reasonable degree of job security” (Reich, 1994: 4). Placing more emphasis on contingent relationships, on the other hand, fundamentally changes the agreement to one in which job security is “strictly limited” (Appelbaum, 1992: 2). Hence, the expectation that employers will provide their workers with the kind of economic security that comes with steady income, benefits that protect against income losses (due to retirement, illness, or disability), and access to career development opportunities is diminishing.

Explanations for the increased use of contingent work arrangements have cited the numerous advantages that organizations adopting them theoretically realize. Such arrangements are particularly noted for their potential to (a) reduce an organization's labor costs (by paying lower wages and benefits); and (b) increase staffing flexibility (in terms of both the numbers and skills of workers) (Appelbaum & Batt, 1994; Tsui, Pearce, Porter & Hite, 1995). Other purported advantages include improved work motivation and perceptions of wage equity among regular employees, as well as enhanced protection against unionization (Pfeffer & Baron, 1988).

These advantages notwithstanding, concerns about the effects of contingent work arrangements on the well-being of both workers and the organizations in which they are employed have sparked considerable debate (duRivage, 1992). Much of the concern that has been expressed about contingent workers centers on four main themes: (1) non-supportive or dehumanizing treatment by managers (Feldman, Doeringhaus, & Turnley; 1994; Rogers, 1995; Steverson, 1997); (2) isolation or hostility from co-workers (McNerney, 1996; Pranschke, 1996; Rogers, 1995); (3) long-term economic insecurity (Carre, 1992; Feldman et al., 1994; Nollen, 1996; Steverson, 1997); and (4) routine, non-challenging work assignments (Nollen, 1996; Parker, 1994; Rogers, 1995). Concerns about the impact of contingent work arrangements on the organization center on the effects of these conditions on workers' attitudes and behaviors in the workplace. One recurring issue pertains to the commitment of contingent workers to their employing organizations (Carre, 1992; Axel, 1995; Tsui et al., 1995). Carre (1992: 76), for example, wrote that organizations making widespread use of

contingent workers suffer “long-term consequences in unrealized potential productivity gains,” because these workers “do not develop an allegiance to their place of employment.”

It is the purpose of this study to examine the effects of the differing conditions of contingent work arrangements on workers’ commitment to their hiring agencies and the organizations to which they are assigned. Extensive research, and a series of meta-analyses, have consistently found that organizational commitment is positively related to job satisfaction (Mathieu & Zajac, 1990; Tett & Meyer, 1993), negatively related to intent to turnover (Mathieu & Zajac, 1990; Cohen, 1991; Tett & Meyer, 1993), and negatively related to turnover (Steel & Ovalle, 1986; Mathieu & Zajac, 1990; Randall, 1990; Cohen, 1991; 1993). There is also limited evidence that organizational commitment is related to motivation, job performance, and attendance, although meta-analyses suggest that these findings may not be robust across other settings and samples (Mathieu & Zajac, 1990; Randall, 1990; Cohen, 1991). Turnover may seem to be of little consequence to organizations utilizing contingent work arrangements, however motivation and attendance are clearly important concerns. As well, recent evidence of a serious shortage of qualified temporary workers suggests that turnover is in fact becoming a salient issue in the temporary help industry (Flynn, 1995; Rubis, 1995). Understanding the factors that influence the organizational commitment of contingent workers is thus becoming increasingly important.

Research on organizational commitment has been conducted in a wide variety of organizations (see Mathieu & Zajac, 1990 for a review). Nevertheless, the studies have typically involved conventional employment relationships in which employees are hired directly by an organization and there is some expectation of continued attachment. To our knowledge, only three studies have examined the organizational commitment of contingent workers. One study examined the relationships between commitment and various characteristics of contingent workers, but did not consider the effects of any of the contextual factors (e.g., compensation, nature of the work) suggested by current models (Feldman et al., 1995). Two studies compared the commitment of contingent workers versus their conventionally employed co-workers (Pearce, 1993; Eberhardt & Moser, 1995). Participants in both of these studies were drawn from a single organization, however, and the effects of contextual factors that vary across contingent work arrangements were not examined. Hence, the extent to which current models of organizational commitment can be used to explain the attitudes of contingent workers is unclear.

The present study extends extant research by examining organizational commitment in a variety of contingent work contexts. Specifically, we (a) examine the effects of factors which current literature suggests are particularly salient in these contexts, and (b) explore an expanded model of organizational commitment that incorporates the multiple foci of these workers' organizational relationships. Theory suggests that an important attribute of traditional employment relationships is the exchange of job security for the employee's commitment to the organization (Griffeth & Hom, 1995). Where job security is not provided, as is the case with contingent work arrangements, organizational commitment should theoretically be low. Yet, the few studies that have examined the impact of contingent work arrangements on organizational commitment have produced mixed results, suggesting that the absence of job security does not in all circumstances preclude the development of worker loyalties. We examine the effects of other factors implied by current models of commitment which critics suggest are the most affected by contingent work arrangements: perceived organizational support, co-worker relations, pay satisfaction, and job satisfaction.

Research on the multiple foci of organizational commitment has identified a variety of attachments that workers may form. These include organizations, professions, unions, supervisors, subordinates, co-workers, and customers (Reichers, 1985; Becker, Billings, Eveleth & Gilbert, 1996). We extend this research by examining the differential commitment of contingent workers to (a) the hiring agency through which work assignments are obtained, and (b) the organization where they are currently assigned. Further, we explore the extent to which the factors posited to affect the organizational commitment of contingent workers have a differential impact on these two foci.

Contingent Work Arrangements

The Bureau of Labor Statistics defines contingent work as "any job in which an individual does not have an explicit or implicit contract for long-term employment" (Polivka & Nardone, 1989: 11). Workers whose employment *may* be considered contingent under this definition include those hired by temporary help agencies, those hired directly by the organization, leased employees, independent contractors, and part-time workers. According to the BLS definition, work performed on a part-time basis, or by leased employees or independent contractors, is *not* considered to be contingent if employment is expected to continue beyond one year (Polivka, 1996a).

Contingent work conjures up images for many of “bad jobs,” such as low paid clerical positions (Larson, 1996; Polivka, 1996c), filled primarily by “down-on-their luck people in between real jobs” (Egan, 1996). In fact, contingent work arrangements, and the workers who enter into them, vary along a number of dimensions. Contingent workers occupy a broad range of occupations, including unskilled labor, administrative support, professional and managerial (Axel, 1995; Polivka, 1996c). Further, although contingent workers typically earn less money and receive fewer benefits than non-contingent workers, recent evidence suggests that there is a wide range of compensation packages in this sector (Hipple & Stewart, 1996; Nollen, 1996). For example, wages and benefits for temporary high-tech workers have recently been high due to tight labor markets (Egan, 1996), whereas the compensation of unskilled workers is relatively low (Hipple & Stewart, 1996).

Workers enter into contingent work arrangements for different reasons. For some (e.g., mothers of young children, students), contingent jobs offer valuable flexibility (Larson, 1996; Lenz, 1996; Polivka, 1996b). Others accept contingent work to gain access to opportunities for longer-term employment (Lenz, 1996; Polivka, 1996b). Still others are forced by economic necessity to accept contingent work because they have no other employment options (duRivage, 1992; Parker, 1994). Extensive survey evidence suggests that the majority of contingent workers prefer more secure employment (Larson, 1996; Nollen, 1996; Polivka, 1996b). The evidence also indicates that a sizable minority are in contingent jobs by choice (Larson, 1996; Nollen, 1996; Polivka, 1996b).

Despite the rapid growth of contingent work arrangements, very little research has examined their impact on workers, and in particular the effects of factors that vary *across* these contexts (Feldman et al., 1995). Two studies compared the safety records of contingent versus conventionally employed workers and found that the former group experiences more accidents (Kochan, Smith, Wells & Rebitzer, 1994; Rousseau & Libuser, 1997). The two groups were also compared by Pearce (1993), who found no significant differences in organizational commitment and extrarole behaviors. Similarly, Eberhardt and Moser (1995) compared the attitudes of voluntary versus involuntary, and temporary versus permanent, part-time workers. In contrast to Pearce’s (1993) findings, temporary part-time workers in this study seemed to be less committed to their organizations than are permanent part-time workers (Eberhardt & Moser, 1995). As noted above, however, it is not clear that the results of these studies can be generalized to other contingent work contexts, because data were collected from individuals working in a single organization. The effects of factors that vary within the

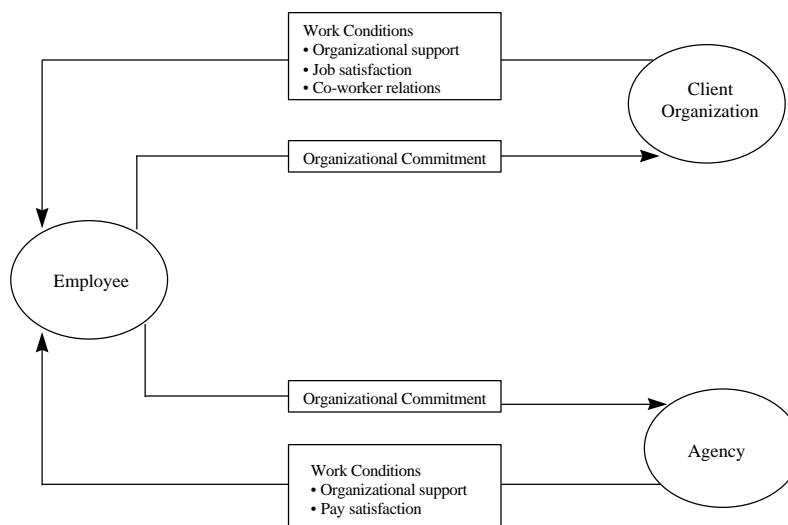
contingent work force were examined by Feldman et al. (1995). They found that workers who are in contingent jobs by choice, and who are in positions consistent with their prior education, are generally the most satisfied with their work, their pay and their temporary help agencies (Feldman et al., 1995). To our knowledge, no study has examined the effects of attributes of contingent work arrangements, such as compensation, the nature of the work, or relationships with others in an organization.

Theoretical Framework and Hypotheses

Consistent with prior research, we examine the effects of differing work arrangements on contingent workers' organizational commitment from a social exchange perspective (Eisenberger, Huntington, Hutchison, & Sowa, 1986; Settoon, Bennett & Liden, 1996; Wayne, Shore & Liden, 1997). In general, this perspective suggests that the actions of each party in the employment exchange (worker and employer) are dependent upon those of the other (Blau, 1964). When one party provides a valued reward or service to the other party, an obligation to reciprocate is created (Blau, 1964). Theory and evidence suggest that loyalty, or commitment, has traditionally been an important commodity of exchange; employer loyalty, in the form of job security, is exchanged for employee loyalty, in the form of organizational commitment (Griffeth & Hom, 1995). We contend that there are other valued commodities employers can provide their contingent workers that will create obligations to reciprocate: organizational support, satisfactory relations with co-workers, satisfactory pay, and satisfactory work. Basically, the idea is that treating workers well is perceived as evidence of the organization's commitment to its workers, theoretically creating an obligation to return the commitment (Wayne, Shore & Liden, 1997).

Figure 1 depicts a model of the exchange relationship in contingent work arrangements. As the model shows, we posit an exchange in which the organizational commitment offered by contingent workers is conditional upon the organization providing them with favorable work conditions. Further, we posit that contingent workers will form attachments to the temporary help agency (agency) that are distinct from their attachments to the organization where they are currently assigned (client). We also expect that the factors influencing contingent workers' commitment to their agencies will differ from the factors influencing commitment to their client organizations.

FIGURE 1
Exchange Relationship for Contingent Workers



Organizational commitment refers in general to the bond or link between an individual and the organization (Mathieu & Zajac, 1990). More specific definitions describe a variety of different forms, the most popular being economic (calculative) and social (affective) commitment (Mathieu & Zajac, 1990; Tett & Meyer, 1993). Affective commitment is defined as “the relative strength of an individual’s identification with and involvement in a particular organization,” and is characterized by “a) a strong belief in and acceptance of the organization’s goals and values; b) a willingness to exert considerable effort on behalf of the organization; and c) a strong desire to maintain membership in the organization” (Mowday, Porter & Steers, 1982: 27). Calculative commitment refers to an employee’s desire to remain with an organization to avoid losing side bets, or sunk costs (e.g., pension plan) that have been invested in the organization (Grover & Crooker, 1995). Contingent work arrangements, by their very nature, preclude such investments. Hence, we focus here on affective commitment.

Research suggests that workers form distinct attachments to multiple constituencies or foci (e.g., organizations, professions, unions) and that the effects of explanatory factors vary across the different foci (Becker, 1992; Fields & Thacker, 1992; Becker et al., 1996). Specifically, this research indicates that organizational commitment is primarily influenced by factors which can be attributed to, or are controlled by, the group or organization that is the

focus of the attachment (Mathieu & Zajac, 1990; Settoon et al., 1996). For instance, Settoon et al. (1996: 220) contended that commitment to the organization is related primarily to “positive discretionary actions” taken by the organization, rather than actions taken by supervisors or other foci. The notion is based on social exchange theory, which suggests that the obligation to reciprocate is to the party that has provided something valuable. Hence, the organization that is perceived as responsible for the positive actions is the object to which workers feel an obligation. In the case of contingent work arrangements, both the hiring agency and the client organization are responsible for actions affecting workers. The hiring agency is responsible for setting and distributing pay. The client organization, on the other hand, is responsible for the work environment, including job design and co-worker relations. Both the agency and the client can be held responsible for their approach (supportive versus non-supportive) to the management of their contingent workers.

Intra-Organizational Relations: Perceived Organizational Support and Co-Worker Relations

One of the concerns that has been raised about contingent work arrangements is that workers may experience isolation and/or hostility from managers and co-workers in an organization (Axel, 1995; Rogers, 1995; McNerney, 1996). To avoid the costs associated with being designated by the IRS as a “co-employer,” responsible for all relevant taxes and mandated benefits, many organizations limit the terms of contingent workers’ employment to less than a year, and refrain from supervising or training them (Klein, 1996). To distinguish them from regular employees, some companies even require contingent workers to use a separate entrance (Pranschke, 1996). The result, according to Rogers (1995), is that these workers become alienated.

Evidence and social exchange theory support the notion that workers’ organizational commitment is related to their perceptions of how they are treated by management and co-workers. Settoon et al. (1996: 220), for example, suggested that perceptions of organizational support (i.e., beliefs “concerning the extent to which the organization values their contributions and cares about their well-being”) are evidence of an organization’s commitment to its employees, a commitment that employees feel obligated to reciprocate. Supporting this hypothesis, Settoon et al. (1996) presented the results of a study of hospital employees showing a strong relationship between organizational commitment and perceived organizational support. Similar results were obtained by Wayne et al. (1997). Further, Mathieu and Zajac (1990) found evidence in their meta-analysis of prior research that “leader consideration” affects organizational commitment. Finally, Pearce (1993) speculated that the

similarities she found in the organizational commitment of contingent workers and employees may be due to the fact that the contingent workers in the study were members of a team and were therefore less isolated than Rogers (1995) and others suggest is typically the case. We are aware of no studies that have examined the effects of co-worker relations on organizational commitment. This gap was recently noted by Wayne et al. (1997), who called for more research on social exchange relationships with co-workers.

Contingent workers interact with managers at both their hiring agencies and their client organizations, and should therefore form distinct perceptions of organizational support in both contexts. Interactions with co-workers, on the other hand, occur in the client organization to which they have been assigned. As noted above, we expect that the factors that can best explain workers' commitment are those that are attributable to the organization that is focus of their attachment. We therefore predict,

- H1: Perceived organizational support from a hiring agency will exhibit a significant relationship with commitment to the agency, but no significant relationship with commitment to the client organization.
- H2: Perceived organizational support from a client organization will exhibit a significant relationship with commitment to the client organization, but no significant relationship with commitment to the hiring agency.
- H3: Co-worker relations will exhibit a significant relationship with commitment to the client organization but no significant relationship with commitment to the hiring agency.

Pay Satisfaction

Compensation has long been considered a key element of any employment relationship, and has been the subject of much of the policy debate about contingent work arrangements (Rogers, 1995; Hipple & Stewart, 1996).¹ Compensation practices influence workers' pay satisfaction, which has been shown to be related to a host of important behaviors and attitudes (see Gerhart & Milkovich, 1992 for a review). There are several reasons to expect a relationship between pay satisfaction and organizational commitment. Equity theory suggests that compensation practices affect workers' perceptions of fairness, and hence their attitudes about their pay and the organization (Griffeth & Hom, 1995). Further, social exchange theory implies that the generosity of the compensation package influences employees' sense of indebtedness to the organization and their perceived obligations to

reciprocate (Heshizer, 1994; Griffeth & Hom, 1995). That is, a positive perception of the organization's generosity in compensating workers theoretically creates a felt obligation to respond in ways that are beneficial to the organization (Heshizer, 1994). Finally, these hypothesized relationships are supported by empirical evidence (Mathieu & Zajac, 1990; Heshizer, 1994). The results of Mathieu and Zajac's (1990) meta-analysis show a significant relationship between pay satisfaction and commitment. Price and Mueller (1986) also found that commitment is affected by perceptions of pay fairness.

On the whole, temporary workers do seem to earn less pay and have fewer benefits than their traditionally employed counterparts (Carre, 1992; Egan, 1996; Hipple & Stewart, 1996). Nevertheless, there is evidence of considerable variation in the compensation of contingent workers, and hence their likely satisfaction with pay and commitment to an organization (Carre, 1992; Hipple & Stewart, 1996). Since, from a worker's point of view, compensation is determined, communicated, and administered by the hiring agency rather than the client organization, we predict,

H4: Pay satisfaction will exhibit a significant relationship with commitment to the hiring agency but no significant relationship with commitment to the client organization.

Job Satisfaction

Contingent workers are employed in a variety of jobs, ranging from unskilled labor to executive positions (Carre, 1992; Axel, 1995; Polivka, 1996c). Still, there is evidence that managers limit the type of work assigned to these workers because of concerns about the lack of firm-specific knowledge and long-term attachment to an employing organization (Pearce, 1993; Parker, 1994; Rogers, 1995; McNerney, 1996). Pearce (1993), for example, found "weak support" for the hypothesis that contingent workers are more likely than employees to be assigned to work with lower task interdependence. Ford Motor Company limits contingent workers to work in "noncore areas" and on "projects or assignments of shorter duration" (McNerney, 1996: 5). Rogers (1995) contended that the assignments typically given to temporary clerical workers are very low in autonomy, skill variety and task identity, and that such conditions cause these workers to become alienated from their jobs.

Whether contingent work is consistently lacking in positive attributes across all of the occupations in which these work arrangements are observed is unclear, since evidence on this issue is limited. Research evidence does suggest that variation in work characteristics is related to job satisfaction, which is in turn related to organizational commitment (Mathieu,

1991; Mathieu & Zajac, 1990). We focus our analysis on the effects of job satisfaction, rather than work characteristics, for two reasons. First, the job characteristics model (Hackman & Oldham, 1980) suggests that the impact of job design on workers' attitudes varies across individuals, depending on such factors as their abilities and the strength of their growth needs. Hence, the same contingent work assignment can generate both positive and negative responses among different workers. We contend that unless the work is perceived favorably, workers will not feel an obligation to reciprocate in kind. It is the affective response to the work, then, rather than the attributes of the work, that can explain organizational commitment. Second, although job characteristics such as autonomy and skill variety have been shown to be related to organizational commitment, Mathieu & Zajac (1990) reported that the relationships are relatively weak. Stronger relationships have been found between commitment and job satisfaction (Mathieu & Zajac, 1990).

Although research on the relationship between job satisfaction and organizational commitment has been extensive, theoretical explanations of this relationship have not been forthcoming (Mathieu & Zajac, 1990). Our model, shown in Figure 1, suggests that satisfactory work is a commodity for exchange. Angle and Perry (1983) argued that the organizational actions workers feel the most obligation to reciprocate are those over which the organization has discretionary control. Providing a valued commodity when there is a choice not to is viewed as an indication of an organization's commitment to its workers which they have an obligation to reciprocate. Job design is clearly under the control of an organization. Hence, contingent workers who are satisfied with their work assignments are likely to attribute this outcome to the good intentions of the employer. Since contingent workers typically change assignments frequently, they are likely to be particularly aware of the range of approaches organizations can take to job design and to be particularly grateful when the approach is a satisfactory one.

Contingent workers perform their jobs at the client organization and should therefore connect the extent to which they are satisfied in their jobs to the client rather than the agency. We predict,

- H5: Job satisfaction will exhibit a significant relationship with commitment to the client organization but no significant relationship with commitment to the hiring agency.

Preferences for Contingent Employment

Differences in preferences of contingent workers for short-term employment have been studied extensively. Survey evidence suggests that whereas the majority of these workers report that they enter contingent work arrangements because they have no choice, there is also a sizable group who say they are in the work voluntarily because they like the flexibility (Feldman et al., 1995; Flynn, 1996; Polivka, 1996b). Research on the effects of these well-documented differences in preferences, however, has been limited. Feldman et al. (1995) contended that workers who accept contingent arrangements voluntarily will focus more on the positive attributes of the work (e.g., flexibility, variety), causing them to have more positive attitudes toward their jobs. The authors surveyed a sample of temporary workers and found, as predicted, that those workers who were in their jobs voluntarily reported significantly higher levels of satisfaction than those who were in the jobs involuntarily. Voluntary temporary workers were also significantly less likely to report feeling “committed to their jobs only because they had no other alternatives” (Feldman et al., 1995: 132). To our knowledge, no study has examined the effect of preferences for contingent work on the affective commitment of these workers.

We predict that workers’ preferences for contingent employment will affect organizational commitment in two ways. First, there is some evidence suggesting that the effect of preferences will be mediated by job and pay satisfaction. Feldman et al. (1995) found that workers who are in temporary jobs by choice are significantly more satisfied with their pay and their work than are those who are in the jobs out of economic necessity. They suggested that workers who have accepted temporary employment “as a last resort” are likely to have lower expectations of their jobs, and attend more to information that confirms these expectations (Feldman et al., 1995). Hence,

H6a: Workers’ preferences for temporary work will be positively related to their job satisfaction.

H6b: Workers’ preferences for temporary work will be positively related to their pay satisfaction.

As discussed above, pay and job satisfaction are expected to be positively related to organizational commitment. Hence, we contend that contingent workers who prefer temporary employment will tend to have higher levels of pay and job satisfaction, which will in turn be associated with higher levels of organizational commitment.

We are also predicting that workers' preferences will have a direct effect on organizational commitment. Workers who prefer a contingent arrangement implicitly indicate a desire for the flexibility it offers, and a preference for moving across various assignments. On the other hand, many workers who do not wish to be employed on a temporary basis report that they accept contingent jobs in hopes of gaining access to longer-term employment at the organization where they are assigned (Lenz, 1996; Polivka, 1996b;) Such workers should be more likely to express attitudes indicating commitment to an organization (e.g., strong desire to remain a member of the organization). Hence, holding pay and job satisfaction constant, we expect that workers who are in contingent jobs by choice will be less committed to the client organization than those who are not.

H7: After controlling for the effects of job satisfaction and pay satisfaction, workers' preferences for temporary work will be negatively related to organizational commitment to the client.

Method

Sample and Procedures

Contingent workers engaged through temporary help agencies in the northeastern United States were asked to complete a survey questionnaire regarding their agency and client organization. Four temporary help agencies and an employment broker distributed the surveys (by mail or with pay checks) to all contingent workers currently on the agencies' active lists.² Completed surveys were returned by mail to the researchers.

Almost by definition, contingent workers are a highly mobile group -- they move in and out of the work force, they change jobs, they often change geographic locations, and they sometimes move into long-term employment. As a result, many of the mailed surveys were either undeliverable or were returned by workers who were no longer employed in contingent work. A total of 960 surveys were successfully delivered. 276 completed surveys were returned, for a response rate of 29%. Missing data were handled using the listwise deletion method, and 197 useable questionnaires (final response rate of 21%) were retained for analysis.³

The sample encompassed a broad range of contexts and workers. Participants were performing work assignments at 95 client organizations and were managed by 54 different temporary agencies. Client organizations included local companies, regional companies, *Fortune* 50, *Fortune* 250, and *Fortune* 1000 firms. The occupation, education and earnings of

participants also varied widely. Twelve percent had only a high school or equivalency diploma, 19% had vocational or technical training, 20% had an associates degree, 39% had a bachelors degree, and 10% had a masters degree. In terms of occupation, 39% said they were clerical workers, 11% said they performed accounting work, 40% reported performing engineering or technical work, and 11% reported being in managerial or executive work. Hourly earnings ranged from \$5.50 to \$60.00, with an average of \$17.62 (SD = 11.29).

Fifty-three percent of the participants were female, and 49% were married. The number of children ranged from 0 to 6, with an average of 0.53 (SD = 1.01). Average age was 38 years (SD = 11), and ranged from 17 to 74 years.

Measures

A combination of established and new survey instruments were used to measure workers' attitudes and perceptions. All items in a specific scale were averaged to compute scale scores.

Preference for Temporary Work. A two-item measure was created to estimate each individual's preference for temporary employment. Each participant was asked to rate on a five-point Likert-type scale the extent to which they agreed with the following alternative reasons for accepting contingent temporary work: (1) I have little choice -- I would prefer a permanent, regular job; and (2) I have a choice and I prefer temporary/contract work. The first question was negatively coded so that a higher score signified a greater desire to be in temporary work. The two items were highly correlated ($r = -0.75$).

Pay Satisfaction. Pay satisfaction was measured using the pay level satisfaction dimension of the Heneman and Schwab (1985) Pay Satisfaction Questionnaire (PSQ). The four-item pay level satisfaction measure was highly reliable, with an alpha level of 0.91. Although pay satisfaction is multidimensional (Heneman & Schwab, 1985; Judge, 1993), we did not include all four measures (i.e., pay level, benefits, raises, and structure and administration) in our analyses. We used only the measure of pay level satisfaction, for two reasons. First, the relevance of satisfaction with benefits, raises, and pay structure/administration to contingent workers is questionable. Many of these workers do not receive benefits or raises, and are not in a work environment with "traditional" pay grades and hierarchies. Second, the pay level dimension of the PSQ has been shown to be highly related to unidimensional measures of pay satisfaction, such as the Minnesota Satisfaction Questionnaire and the Job Description Index (Heneman & Schwab, 1985).

Overall Job Satisfaction. Overall job satisfaction was measured with a two-item measure. Participants were asked to rate on a 5-point Likert-type scale their satisfaction with (1) the job as a whole and (2) the work itself (what they do). The two items were highly correlated ($r = 0.84$).

Satisfaction with Co-Worker Relations. Co-worker relations was measured using a 5-item instrument. Participants were asked to rate on a five point Likert-type scale the extent to which they were satisfied with the following: (1) the friendliness of the people you work with; (2) the way you are treated by the people you work with; (3) the opportunity to join in team celebrations; (4) the opportunity to be part of the team; and (5) the amount of information about the work shared with you by co-workers, customers, and the business. The measure had an alpha level of 0.70.

Organizational Commitment and Perceived Organizational Support. We adapted the Mowday, Porter and Steers (1982) nine-item measure of organizational commitment to ascertain subjects' commitment to (1) their hiring agency (commitment to agency), and (2) the organization where they are currently assigned (commitment to client). The only adaptation to the measure was to make explicit to the participants that the questions referred to their hiring agency or the client organization. We created a measure of perceived organizational support based on the questionnaire developed by Eisenberger et al. (1986). Again, the survey explicitly differentiated between perceptions of organizational support from the hiring agency (support from the agency) and from the client organization (support from the client).

Coefficient alpha levels from all of the commitment and support measures were lower than those typically reported. The coefficient alpha for the measure of perceived organizational support from the client was 0.56, and 0.68 for the measure of perceived organizational support from the agency. The alpha level for the measure of organizational commitment to the client was 0.57, and the measure of commitment to the agency had an alpha level of 0.63.

These results are lower than expected, given that studies using these measures typically report alpha levels of 0.80 or higher (Eisenberger et al., 1986; Mowday et al., 1982; Settoon et al., 1996). Although the low reliabilities suggest that the results should be interpreted and applied with caution, the levels obtained in this study may be considered acceptable given that no research has yet investigated the measurement of these constructs for contingent workers (Nunnally, 1978). Moreover, subsequent analyses (available from the

authors upon request) indicated that the items still load predominantly on one factor, and that the first principle component of the items is essentially equal to the averaged measure score.

Commitment has been measured many times in the past, however it has rarely been measured in a sample of contingent workers. The unique characteristics of this sample merit further investigation. It may be that the measures we used are not as applicable to contingent workers as they are to traditionally employed workers and that lower reliabilities should be expected when surveying these and other non-traditional workers. Nonetheless, our investigations suggest that, despite the lower than expected alpha levels, these measures behave much like we would expect them to in other ways. We therefore decided to include these measures in our analyses. We highlight below the implications of this decision for the interpretation of the current findings, and for future research.

Control variables. There is some evidence of small but significant relationships between organizational commitment and workers' personal characteristics (Mathieu & Zajac, 1990; Feldman et al., 1995). To control for these effects, we included in our analyses measures of workers' age, gender, marital status, number of children, and occupation. Age and number of children were measured as continuous variables. Marital status (married or not married) and occupation (clerical, accounting, engineering/technical, or managerial/executive) were measured as discrete categorical variables.

Results

Summary statistics and correlations for the study's key variables are shown in Table 1. As the Table shows, the mean response to questions regarding participants' preferences for temporary work (2.69) was below the measure neutral point of 3 ($t = 3.02$; $p < .01$), signifying that the sample, on average, had a preference not to be in temporary work. Nonetheless, responses to these questions covered the entire 1 to 5 range of the scale. Indeed, 30% of the sample indicated a positive preference for temporary work. Responses to the commitment items also covered the full range of the five-point scale. Our sample of temporary workers thus exhibited a wide range of attitudes about contingent work, their client organizations, and their agencies. Consistent with previous studies (e.g., Feldman, et al., 1995; Polivka, 1996b), we found that a majority of this study's participants would prefer longer-term employment relationships, but that a significant minority were in contingent jobs by choice. Furthermore, the dependent variables of interest in this study—commitment to the agency and commitment to the client—exhibited a wide range of values.

Hypotheses were tested using OLS regression techniques. The first set of regressions, shown in Table 2, predicts commitment to the client; the second set of regressions, shown in Table 3, predicts commitment to the agency. To control for the effects of personal characteristics, we conducted each set of regressions in two steps (Pearce, 1993). The first step predicted the commitment measures using gender, age, marital status, number of children, and occupation. The second step of each regression added the variables hypothesized to be related to workers' organizational commitment: preference for temporary work, job satisfaction, pay satisfaction, satisfaction with co-workers, commitment from the agency, and commitment from the client. We used this procedure to determine if the variables of interest in this study accounted for variance in the commitment measures beyond that attributable to the demographic and occupational characteristics of our respondents.

TABLE 2: Prediction of Commitment to the Client Organization

Independent Variables	Step 1 Control Variables (β) (std error of β)	Step 2 All Variables (β) (std error of β)
Intercept	3.00**** (0.26)	0.50 (0.28)
Gender (1 = female)	0.30* (0.15)	0.20* (0.099)
Age	0.0028 (0.0057)	0.011** (0.0039)
Marital Status (1 = Married)	-0.040 (0.13)	-0.16 (0.090)
# of Children	0.072 (0.063)	0.022 (0.042)
Accounting worker	-0.069 (0.21)	-0.20 (0.14)
Engineering/Technical worker	-0.0026 (0.17)	-0.10 (0.12)
Managerial/Executive worker	-0.038 (0.21)	-0.18* (0.15)
Preference for Temporary Work		-0.12*** (0.033)
Pay Satisfaction		-0.007 (0.039)
Job Satisfaction		0.28**** (0.043)
Satisfaction with Co-Worker Relations		0.22**** (0.054)
Support from Agency		-0.07 (0.054)
Support from Client		0.44**** (0.066)
R-squared	0.04	0.60
Adj R-squared	0.00	0.57

Notes: n = 197; * p < .05; ** p < .01; *** p < .001; **** p < .0001

TABLE 3
Prediction of Commitment to the Temporary Help Agency

Independent Variables	Step 1 Control Variables (β) (std error of β)	Step 2 All Variables (β) (std error of β)
Intercept	2.95**** (0.24)	0.45 (0.25)
Gender (1 = female)	0.31* (0.14)	0.24** (0.088)
Age	0.00085 (0.0053)	0.0084* (0.0034)
Marital Status (1 = Married)	-0.031 (0.13)	-0.042 (0.079)
# of Children	0.027 (0.059)	0.024 (0.038)
Accounting worker	-0.25 (0.20)	-0.060 (0.13)
Engineering/Technical worker	-0.22 (0.16)	-0.060 (0.10)
Managerial/Executive worker	-0.49* (0.20)	-0.16 (0.13)
Preference for Temporary Work		-0.033 (0.029)
Pay Satisfaction		0.13*** (0.034)
Job Satisfaction		0.0042 (0.038)
Satisfaction with Co-Worker Relations		-0.017 (0.048)
Support from Agency		0.62**** (0.047)
Support from Client		0.045 (0.058)
R-squared	0.10	0.66
Adj R-squared	0.06	0.64

Notes: n = 197; * p < .05; ** p < .01; *** p < .001; **** p < .0001

Results of the first step of each set of regressions indicate that demographic characteristics account for some variance in organizational commitment, but ultimately a very small amount. For both dependent variables, women exhibited higher levels of organizational commitment than men, a finding consistent with the marginally significant result of the Mathieu and Zajac (1990) meta-analysis. Those performing temporary managerial/executive work showed lower commitment to the temporary agency, but otherwise no other significant results for the demographic variables were found in the first step of either set of regressions.

Results of the second steps of each regression supported out hypotheses. Overall, relationships between the explanatory factors and relevant outcomes were significant and in the predicted directions. Organizational commitment was found to have the strongest relationship with perceived organizational support, but statistically significant relationships were also found for co-worker relations, job satisfaction, preferences for temporary work, and pay satisfaction. The estimated effect of support from the agency on commitment to the agency is almost six times as large as the estimated effect of pay satisfaction. Similarly, the estimated effect of support from the client on commitment to the client is strong, with significant but smaller effects found for co-worker relations, worker preferences and job satisfaction.

Hypothesis 1 predicts that perceived organizational support from the agency will exhibit a significant relationship with commitment to the agency, but no relationship with commitment to the client. Hypothesis 2 predicts a significant relationship between organizational support from the client and commitment to the client, but no relationship with commitment to the hiring agency. As shown in Tables 2 and 3, these hypotheses are supported: perceived support from the agency has no significant effect on commitment to the client; however perceived support from the agency has a strong ($\beta = 0.64$) and significant ($p < .0001$) effect on commitment to the agency. Similarly, we find that perceived organizational support from the client is significantly related to commitment to the client ($\beta = 0.46$, $p < .0001$), but not to the agency.

Hypothesis 3 predicts that satisfaction with co-worker relations will exhibit a significant relationship with commitment to the client organization, but no relationship with commitment to the agency. As shown in Tables 2 and 3, the estimated relationship between co-worker relations and commitment to the agency is not significant, but the relationship with commitment to the client, as shown in Table 2, is ($\beta = 0.28$; $p < .0001$).

We predicted that pay satisfaction would be related to commitment to the agency but not to the client (Hypothesis 4). The results support this hypothesis: pay satisfaction was

unrelated to commitment to the client, but significantly related to commitment to the agency ($\beta = 0.11$; $p < .01$). We also predicted that job satisfaction would exhibit a significant relationship with commitment to the client but not to the agency (Hypothesis 5). As expected, results indicated a significant relationship with commitment to the client ($\beta = 0.20$; $p < .0001$) and a nonsignificant relationship with commitment to the agency.

Our hypotheses that preference for temporary work would be positively related to job satisfaction (Hypothesis 6a) and pay satisfaction (Hypothesis 6b) was supported, as shown by the correlations in Table 1. The correlation between preference for temporary work and job satisfaction was positive ($r = 0.28$) and significant ($p < .001$). The correlation between preference for temporary work and pay satisfaction was also positive ($r = 0.33$) and significant ($p < .0001$).

Hypothesis 7 predicts that, holding job satisfaction and pay satisfaction constant, workers' preferences for temporary work would be negatively related to commitment to the client. As shown in Table 1, the simple correlation between preference for temporary work and commitment to the client is insignificant. Results of the regression analyses, which control for the effects of job and pay satisfaction, provide support for our hypothesis. As shown in Table 2, preference for temporary work was negatively related to commitment to the client ($\beta = -0.14$; $p < .0001$).

In the fuller regressions, some effects for the control variables were observed. Both gender and age had significant relationships with the commitment measures, and those in managerial/executive work showed lower commitment to the client organization. The majority of the variance in both commitment measures, however, is attributable to the hypothesized explanatory variables rather than demographic or occupational characteristics.

Discussion

The results of our study suggest that contingent workers vary considerably in their felt commitment to their employing organizations. Contrary to popular belief, the organizational commitment of many of these workers to the client organizations is relatively high. Our findings also suggest that contingent workers form attachments to both their hiring agencies and to their client organizations, and that the effects of factors theoretically linked to organizational commitment vary across the two foci. Specifically, we found that the commitment of contingent workers to their hiring agency is positively related to perceived support from the agency and pay satisfaction. Workers' commitment to a client organization,

on the other hand, is positively related to perceived support from the client, co-worker relations, and job satisfaction. As predicted, we found that preference for temporary work is positively related to job satisfaction and pay satisfaction but, after controlling for the linear effects of these constructs, is negatively related to commitment to the client.

Perhaps the most interesting result of our study is that the organizational commitment of contingent workers seems to be most influenced by their perceptions of how well they are treated by their agencies and client organizations. The observed effects of perceived organizational support are larger -- in some cases quite a bit larger -- than those of pay satisfaction, job satisfaction and preference. This result fully supports the notion of social exchange: workers' willingness to make a commitment to an organization is influenced by their perceptions of how committed their organizations are to them. Indeed, job security, arguably a strong indicator of an organization's commitment to its employees, has been shown to be highly related to employees' commitment to their organization (Griffeth & Hom, 1995). Yet job *insecurity* is a fundamental (and virtually invariant) characteristic of contingent work. Our findings suggest that, even organizations that do not provide job security may still communicate variable levels of commitment to their workers. Perceived organizational support may be particularly salient for contingent workers if, as the literature suggests, they have experienced isolation and/or hostility in their work relationships (Axel, 1995; Rogers, 1995; McNerney, 1996). Such experiences may enhance the sensitivity of these workers to differences in the way they are treated by various agencies and organizations.

Our findings provide new information about the variability of contingent workers' perceptions regarding their agencies, client organizations, co-workers, jobs and pay, and the effects of these factors on organization commitment. A few studies have compared the organizational commitment of contingent versus traditionally employed workers (Pearce, 1993; Eberhardt & Moser, 1995), but the effects of variables that vary across contingent work assignments have not been examined. Prior studies have investigated the effects of perceived organizational support, pay satisfaction and job satisfaction, but none have involved contingent workers. Further, we are aware of no other study that examines the effect of co-worker relations on organizational support. As such, our study contributes to current knowledge about contingent workers.

Limitations

Some aspects of this study may limit the generalizability of our conclusions, and thus merit some attention. First, we obtained relatively low alpha coefficients for the organizational

commitment and perceived organizational support scales. Repeated applications of these measures using samples of traditionally employed workers have consistently generated high reliabilities. Nonetheless, our results may indicate that the scales simply do not provide as reliable a measure of the attitudes of contingent workers. Because the scales were developed and validated using traditionally employed workers, this seems like a viable explanation for our findings. Further, theory and evidence suggest that the experiences and attitudes of contingent workers are likely to be qualitatively different from those of traditionally employed workers. Factors (e.g., job security, promotion opportunities) that theory suggest will affect organizational commitment are simply not a part of the contingent worker's experience. Contingent workers are also uniquely involved in dual employment relationships -- with the hiring agency and the client organization. It should therefore not be surprising to find that the measure used to assess commitment behaves differently in applications to contingent workers than in applications to traditionally employed workers. Although similar problems were not reported in the two other studies using the Mowday et al. (1982) instrument to measure the organizational commitment of contingent workers, alpha coefficients in both studies were calculated for the pooled sample of contingent and traditionally employed workers (Pearce, 1993; Eberhardt & Moser, 1995). Perceived organizational support measures have to date not been used in studies of contingent workers. Hence, the extent to which our findings are idiosyncratic to the sample is unclear. Further investigation is warranted. Nevertheless, given the significance of our results, and the support for our hypotheses, it would seem that improving the measurement of these constructs with contingent workers would tend to strengthen our findings.

Another limitation of this study stems from the fact that the data consist of self-report survey responses from a single source: the contingent workers. Thus, common method variance may bias our results. Unfortunately, this potential bias is almost unavoidable in studies of contingent workers. Collecting data from multiple sources was not feasible because the workers were associated with a large number of client organizations and temporary employment agencies. Limiting the sample to a single organization would have limited the generalizability of our results and our ability to assess the effects of factors that vary across work arrangements. Furthermore, the information that organizations are likely to have about their contingent workers is very limited, because IRS rules pertaining to co-employment tend to discourage direct supervision. Hence, information from other sources -- such as managerial ratings of performance or organizational citizenship behavior -- may simply be unavailable. An

alternative is to gather survey data from contingent workers in two waves (Spector, 1994). Given the transient nature of contingent work, however, any time lag in the data collection procedure may make obtaining a viable sample size very difficult. These potential limitations notwithstanding, we contend that as a first, exploratory study of the variety of contingent work settings that currently exist, the contributions are substantial.

Implications for Theory and Future Research

The results of our study suggest that models of organizational commitment may need to be adjusted to account for the unique characteristics of contingent work. Current models imply that job security is a critical variable in the exchange relationship (Griffeth & Hom, 1995). Our results suggest that the more general perception of organizational support is key to explaining the commitment of contingent workers, and that social exchange theory is applicable to understanding these attitudes even in situations where job security is not present. Further, our findings suggest that multiple foci models of organizational commitment can be extended to include the dual employment relationships (with the hiring agency and the client organization) that contingent work often involves. We found that the effects of many of the explanatory factors included in current models vary substantially across the two foci of commitment. Hence, whereas pay satisfaction may be helpful in explaining the organizational commitment of traditionally employed workers, the same cannot be said about the organizational commitment of contingent workers. Our findings indicate that pay satisfaction is significantly related to the commitment of contingent workers to their agency, but not their commitment to the client organization.

There remains a substantial gap in our current knowledge about the effects of contingent work arrangements. Little is known, for example, about the effects of various contingent work arrangements on important outcomes such as performance, or work team effectiveness. Further research is also needed on the effects of other factors that may affect the attitudes and behaviors of contingent workers. Prior studies have found that perceived personal competence and organizational centralization, for example, are related to organizational commitment (Mathieu & Zajac, 1990).

Future research should also address the methodological issues we have raised. First, as we noted earlier, further exploration of the validity of the Mowday et al. (1982) organizational commitment scale for contingent workers is needed. This would initially involve administering the scale to a larger sample of contingent workers. If similarly low alpha coefficients are obtained, additional research would be needed to (a) examine the types of

workers and/or conditions for which the scale is/is not valid, and (b) develop and validate a scale for use with contingent workers. Second, to overcome problems of common method variance, future studies examining the effects of contingent work arrangements on employee attitudes and behaviors should endeavor to include data from multiple sources. Managerial ratings of performance, or organizational citizenship behavior, would provide information about these effects which would be independent of workers' perceptions. As discussed above, obtaining such data may be extremely difficult, since co-employment concerns and the transient nature of the relationship often means that the information is simply not available.

Implications for Practice

We believe that the insights gained from this study will be of interest to most managers, given the significant role contingent work relationships are playing in the modern work force, and the expectation that these relationships will increase in importance in the future (Axel, 1995). Although contingent work arrangements are often employed to provide a buffer for a core workforce, recent evidence suggests that many organizations and temporary help agencies are facing problems attracting and retaining quality workers for these positions (Flynn, 1995; Rubis, 1995). Concerns about the impact of organizational commitment on motivation and attendance have also heightened interest in engendering positive attitudes among contingent workers (Carre, 1996). We found that workers' attitudes were significantly related to their perceptions of organizational support. Furthermore, the range of responses to questions about how much their client organizations cared about their well-being, their general satisfaction at work, and so on suggests that positive perceptions of organizational support are possible even in the absence of job security or close working relationships. Hence, managers concerned about the organizational commitment of contingent workers should seek ways to convey to these workers that their organizations are making every effort to be supportive. This might involve first determining what constitutes support (e.g., training, benefits, etc.), and then striving to augment these elements to the extent possible. Managers in client organizations should also try to integrate their contingent workers into the work force so they develop successful and satisfactory working relationships with their co-workers. In organizations where traditionally employed workers express hostility toward contingent workers, perhaps because of concerns about losing their jobs to these workers, managers will need to initiate programs (e.g., training, communication) for creating a more friendly working environment.

Organizations anticipating a steady demand for contingent workers, or conversions of temporary jobs into long-term positions, should consider hiring individuals who have little preference for temporary work. Our results suggest that, holding job and pay satisfaction constant, such workers exhibit higher levels of organizational commitment than workers who prefer temporary employment. These workers may ultimately be willing to enter into a permanent employment relationship. On the other hand, if a company only wants workers for a short time period, then it would likely do better with contingent workers who enjoy their temporary status, and thus would have higher levels of job satisfaction and have fewer expectations of the employment relationship being long-term or becoming permanent.

ENDNOTES

¹ duRivage (1992), for example, argues that the low pay and benefits associated with contingent work arrangements have increased the economic vulnerability of “too many” workers, and calls for federal legislation to regulate the compensation of these workers.

² An employment broker is an agency that makes arrangements with temporary help agencies to provide contingent workers to the client organization.

³ In most of the cases where data were missing, respondents had skipped over entire sections of the survey. There were no responses, for example, to questions about satisfaction, or preference for temporary work. Thus, missing data techniques such as mean substitution, regression imputation, or the EM algorithm, may have yielded inaccurate estimates. To avoid any possibility of bias in our results, we employed the listwise deletion technique.

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