

Do Career Self-Management Behaviors Predict the Employee Commitment? A Study of Business Process Outsourcing (BPO) Firms in Sri Lanka

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ABSTRACT

In the contemporary organizational environment where there is no guarantee for long term employment, the employees are responsible for managing their own careers by the involvement of a range of career self-management behaviors. In such an environment, whether the employees are committed to their organizations is questionable. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to investigate whether there is an effect of employee career self-management behaviors on their commitment. An online survey was distributed among a random sample of 200 managerial level employees of 20 BPO firms. With a response rate of 47%, 94 managerial level employees reported the effects of career self-management behaviors such as networking behavior, visibility behavior, and mobility behavior on employee commitment. Based on multiple hierarchical regression analysis, it was found that the networking and visibility behaviors promote employee affective commitment and normative commitment whereas the externally oriented mobility behavior results in lowering the employee affective attachment and normative commitment. These findings provide implications to the theory of proactive behavior and the social cognitive career theory. In terms of managerial implications, the firms should create an organizational culture that is conducive for employees to involve with career self-management behaviors aimed at furthering careers within the organization. The limitations and the implications of the study for future research are also discussed.

KEYWORDS: Career Self-Management; Commitment; BPO Firms; Sri Lanka.

1. INTRODUCTION

Contemporary career literature suggests that the employees should be in charge of their careers (Runhaar *et al.*, 2019; Shuck *et al.*, 2018). Empirical evidence indicates that levels of commitment may improve (Yogalakshmi and Suganthi, 2020; Sturges *et al.*, 2005; Sturges *et al.*, 2000) or decrease (Bambacas and Bordia, 2009) with the advent of career self-management. In relation to the relationship between career self-management behaviors and employee commitment, the extant literature reports some deficiencies. Firstly, there are contradictory research findings in this area of study. For example, some studies have found that career self-management behavior is negatively associated with the normative commitment (Bambacas and Bordia, 2009; Feldman and Ng, 2007; Smeenk *et al.*, 2006) and affective commitment (Supeli and Creed, 2016) of employees whereas Bambacas (2010) reported that the career self-management is positively associated with both of the commitment components. However, Sturges *et al.* (2000) and Wickramaratne (2018) claimed that career self-management behaviors do little to encourage employee commitment. Secondly, most of these studies have defined career self-management behavior as a single construct. However, self-management is a dynamic process that involves the execution of a set of occurring individual self-management behaviors (Batistic and Tymon, 2017; King, 2004) which is one possibility for having these contrasting results in previous studies. Thirdly, limited research attention has been afforded to normative commitment in the career literature (Johnson *et al.*, 2010; Meyer and Parfyonova, 2010; Wickramaratne, 2018), particularly since normative and affective commitment have been found to be correlated (Meyer *et al.*, 2002) and therefore perceived as similar constructs. Even recent studies have also focused more on affective commitment (e.g., Alonderiene and Simkeviciute, 2018; Redondo *et al.*, 2019; Yogalakshmi and Suganthi, 2020). Finally, Johnson *et al.* (2010) argued that the normative commitment is subject to cultural socialization which implies that the research outcomes may vary in different cultural contexts. This argument was further supported by Nishanthi and Kailasapathy (2018). Therefore, there should be country-specific studies in this area of study. The purpose of this study was to address these deficiencies in the extant literature by examining the effects of individual career self-management behaviors on different commitment components. The literature to date does not indicate any studies that have examined the effects of individual career self-management behaviors such as networking, visibility, and externally oriented mobility behaviors on different employee commitment components. Such an investigation is important to explore how a particular group of employees' level of commitment differs when they involve in different career self-management behaviors.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Referring to the theory of proactive behavior (Crant, 2000) and the extended model of social cognitive career theory (Lent and Brown, 2006), participation in career self-management behaviors that are directed at personally valued goals in the career domain is expected to promote an individual's job attitudes like commitment.

Supporting the predictions of the extended model of social cognitive career theory (Lent and Brown, 2006) and the theory of proactive behavior (Crant, 2000), the available literature provides evidence for the relationship between career self-management behaviors and commitment (Alonderiene and Simkeviciute, 2018; Bambacas, 2010; Redondo *et al.*, 2019; Yogalakshmi and Suganthi, 2020; Wickramaratne, 2018). Bambacas (2010) revealed that career-self management was positively related to affective commitment and that individuals might feel more obligated (normative commitment) towards the organization when the organization provides opportunities for them to manage their careers.

2.1 CAREER SELF-MANAGEMENT BEHAVIORS AND AFFECTIVE COMMITMENT

There is general support for the positive relationship between career self-management and employee affective commitment (e.g. Alonderiene and Simkeviciute, 2018; Redondo *et al.*, 2019; Yogalakshmi and Suganthi, 2020). Some other studies have found the relationship between individual career self-management behaviors. With reference to networking behavior, engaging in internal networking behavior is expected to generate an emotional attachment to an individual's organization (McCallum *et al.*, 2014). According to social information processing theory (Salancik and Pfeffer, 1978), interactions with work colleagues where individuals feel supported should positively influence their attitudes. Sturges *et al.* (2005) found that career self-management behavior aimed at visibility behavior was positively associated with affective commitment whereas Wickramaratne (2018) found that the employee affective commitment is higher when their mobility behavior is lower. In this study 'visibility behavior' was conceptualized as seeking credit for the work done by an employee. However, a lower level of affective attachment to the organization was found when employees demonstrated externally oriented mobility behavior (Briscoe and Finkelstein, 2009; Kondratuk *et al.*, 2004; Sturges *et al.*, 2005; Sturges *et al.*, 2002).

Theoretical prediction of the extended model of social cognitive career theory (Lent and Brown, 2006) and the theory of proactive behavior (Crant, 2000) together with empirical findings led to establishing the study's first hypothesis.

Hypothesis-1

- a) Networking behavior, and b) visibility behavior positively and c) mobility behavior negatively impact on affective commitment.

2.2 CAREER SELF-MANAGEMENT BEHAVIORS AND NORMATIVE COMMITMENT

Prior studies support the argument that mobility behavior is negatively associated with employee normative commitment (Suzuki and Hur, 2020; Briscoe and Finkelstein, 2009; Kondratuk *et al.*, 2004, Sturges *et al.*, 2002). For example, Kondratuk *et al.* (2004) reported that the employees with a history of external career mobility (number of external job moves over one's career) were negatively related to the employees' normative commitment since they have a lower obligation to stay. Further, Suzuki and Hur (2020) found that the employees demonstrate higher normative commitment when they perceive that there is a cost of leaving the firm. Networking internally may enhance feelings of normative commitment and affective commitment since the involvement in relationships is a means to integrate into a community (Cohen and Prusak, 2001). According to social information processing theory (Salancik and Pfeffer, 1978), information from internal work colleagues (by involving in networking behavior) may help individuals identify with, understand, and subsequently adopt organizational norms and values. Internal networking behaviors may also perpetuate a sense of obligation. This could result through reciprocity (Gouldner, 1960) built up within the organization, restricting a person's perceived ability to leave due to outstanding "favors" still owed to others as well as unclaimed "favors" owed to oneself. Furthermore, individuals may feel subtle pressure to stay with an organization as leaving would result in failing to meet the outstanding obligations of their colleagues. As a result, internal networking behaviors are anticipated to have a positive relationship with normative commitment (McCallum *et al.*, 2014). Theoretical prediction of the extended model of social cognitive career theory (Lent and Brown, 2006) and the theory of proactive behavior (Crant, 2000), and the findings of the above discussed prior studies led to establishing the study's second hypothesis.

Hypothesis-2

- a) Networking behavior, and b) visibility behavior positively and c) mobility behavior negatively impacts on normative commitment.

The hypothetical relationships proposed in the study are presented in the following conceptual framework.

3. METHOD

Sample and procedure

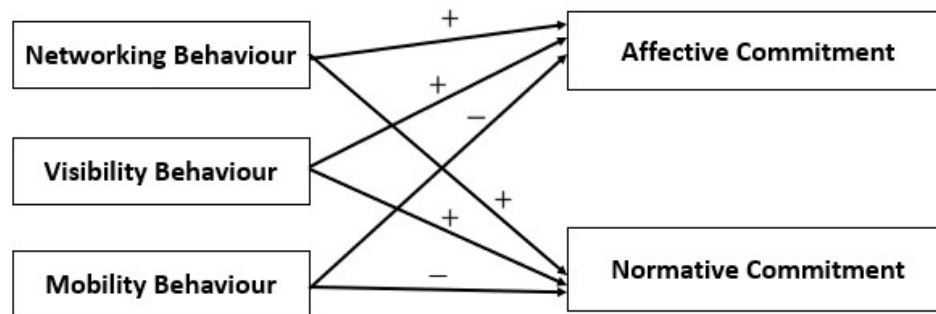
The study employed the stratified random sampling technique. Surveys were distributed among a random sample of 200 managerial level employees from 20 well performing Business Process Outsourcing (BPO) companies operating in Sri Lanka. The human resource management department of each firm was contacted via email and requested to distribute web links of the survey among a random sample of 10 managerial level employees.

3.1 MEASURES

All the survey measures were chosen from prior research based on their established validity and prior application. Career self-management is under the control of the individual and consists of gathering "information and plans for career problem solving and decision-making. It involves two main behaviors: one relating to continuous improvement in one's current job, and the other related to movement-job mobility preparedness" (Kossek *et al.*, 1998). Employee perceptions of career self-management aimed at furthering their career within the organization (networking behavior and visibility behavior) as well as furthering their career outside the organization (mobility behavior) were measured in line with this definition.

Measurement scales originally devised and validated by Sturges *et al.* (2002) were used to measure these behaviors. Some examples of the scale items for networking behavior include: "I have introduced myself to people who can influence my career;" for mobility, behavior include: "I have made plans to leave this organization if it cannot offer me a rewarding career;" and for visibility, behavior include: "I have made my boss aware of my accomplishments."

Figure 1. Conceptual framework.



3.2 AFFECTIVE AND NORMATIVE COMMITMENT

Meyer and Allen's (1997) definitions for affective and normative commitment were adhered to in this study. The affective commitment was measured in terms of willingness to stay with the firm because of emotional attachment to it and identification with it as well as involvement in the organization, whereas normative commitment was measured in terms of the employees' feeling of a moral obligation to stay with the organization. Many career studies to date (e.g., Joo and Park, 2010; Maurer and Lippstreu, 2008; Sturges *et al.*, 2002) have utilized the affective commitment scale developed by Meyer *et al.* (1993). Consistent with prior research, this study adopted Meyer *et al.*'s (1993) six-item questionnaire to measure affective commitment; it included items such as: "I would be very happy to spend the rest of my career life with this organization". Similarly, prior studies (e.g., Bambacas, 2010; Bambacas and Bordia, 2009) have measured normative commitment with the six-item normative commitment scale developed by Meyer *et al.* (1993). The current study has adopted this scale to measure normative commitment; it included items such as: "I would feel guilty if I left my organization now."

3.3 CONTROL VARIABLES

Respondents' demographic information such as age, gender, tenure, and the highest level of education completed was collected with single-item questions.

4. RESULTS

Means, standard deviations, and inter-item correlations are shown in Table 1. The diagonal of this table presents Cronbach's Alpha values which indicate that all measures demonstrated adequate levels of reliability. 94 duly completed surveys were received which accounted for a 47% response rate. Many employees were female (62%). Mean and standard deviation statistics relating to these demographic variables are presented in Table 1. The mean age of respondents was 37 and the average organizational tenure was 6 years. The inter-item correlation coefficients indicate that there are significant positive correlations between study variables.

4.1 HYPOTHESES TESTING

The multiple hierarchical regression analysis was used to test the hypothesized relationships. The reason for employing hierarchical regression analysis was to control the effects of demographic variables such as age, gender, and tenure on the hypothesized relationships because correlation coefficients showed that the demographic variables have significant relations with commitment. For example, as indicated in Table 1, tenure is correlated with affective commitment ($r=.211, p<.01$) and normative commitment ($r=.157, p<.01$) whereas gender is correlated with the normative commitment ($r=.148, p<.01$).

Hypothesis-1 of the study predicted that a) networking behavior, and b) visibility behavior positively and, c) mobility behavior negatively impact affective commitment. After considering the effect of tenure networking behavior ($\beta = .349, p < .05$) and visibility behavior ($\beta = .348, p < .05$) positively whereas mobility behavior ($\beta = -.400, p < .05$) negatively impacts on affective

commitment. Therefore, hypothesis-1 of the study is accepted. Hypothesis 2 of the study predicted that a) networking behavior, and b) visibility behavior positively and, c) mobility behavior negatively impact normative commitment. After considering the effects of tenure and gender, networking behavior ($\beta = .405$, $p < .05$) and visibility behavior ($\beta = .397$, $p < .05$) positively whereas mobility behavior ($\beta = -.496$, $p < .05$) negatively impacts on normative commitment. Therefore, hypothesis-2 of the study is accepted. Overall, the purpose of this study was achieved by revealing the effects of individual career self-management behaviors on commitment.

5. DISCUSSION

This study explored the contribution of career self-management behaviors made to develop employees' emotional attachment and feeling a moral obligation to stay with the company. Based on the results, it was found that the employees' involvement with building contacts with people who will assist with their career development (networking behavior) and getting the attention of supervisors for employees' achievements (visibility behavior) result in building their affective commitment and normative commitment. Conversely, when employees make plans to leave the company on the grounds that there are no opportunities for developing careers, their affective and normative commitment is decreased. By referring these findings to the theory of proactive behavior (Crant, 2000) and the extended model of social cognitive career theory (Lent and Brown, 2006), participation in career self-management behaviors that are directed at personally valued goals in the career domain promote an individual's job attitudes such as emotional attachment and an obligatory feeling to stay with the company. Therefore, the current finding provides implications for these two theories. The current findings are in agreement with the general argument that employee career self-management behaviors are related to employee affective commitment and normative commitment (Alonderiene and Simkeviciute, 2018; Bambacas, 2010; Redondo *et al.*, 2019; Yogalakshmi and Suganthi, 2020). The outcomes such as the negative effect of mobility behavior on normative commitment (Briscoe and Finkelstein, 2009; Kondratuk *et al.*, 2004; Stueges *et al.*, 2002) as well as the positive effect of networking behavior on normative commitment (Cohen and Prusak, 2001) are in agreement with prior studies. Also, the outcomes of this study support the prior studies that have revealed a negative effect of mobility behavior on employee affective commitment (Briscoe and Finkelstein, 2009; Kondratuk *et al.*, 2004; Sturges *et al.*, 2005; Sturges *et al.*, 2002) as well as the positive effects of networking behavior (McCallum *et al.*, 2014) and visibility behavior (Sturges *et al.*, 2005) on the affective commitment of employees.

5.1 PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

An organization should develop a career development culture where employees involve actively in career self-management behaviors such as networking and visibility aimed at furthering their careers within the organization. As a result of these behaviors, the employees feel emotionally attached and obligated to the organization. This felt obligation will lead employees to further their careers with the organization instead of engaging with externally-oriented mobility behavior. On the policy level, budgetary allocations for encouraging and training employees for networking and visibility skills may be made by the organization. Group training, particularly off-site, may cost more, but it provides opportunities for networking, and may also be seen as recognition. These sorts of policy changes may be implemented via HR managers and through other managers. The managers who implement these policies should be rewarded for providing opportunities for their staff.

Table 1. Correlation matrix of variables.

	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Age (Years)	37.0	11.6								
Gender	N/A	NA	-.198**							
Tenure (Years)	6	3.1	.587**	.051						
Networking Behavior	3.87	.52	-.235**	-.051	-.169*	.806				
Mobility Behavior	3.59	.95	-.339**	-.035	-.353**	-.098	.836			
Visibility Behavior	3.90	.92	-.228**	.002	-.080*	-.073	-.189**	.808		
Affective Commitment	3.60	.74	.129	.120	.211**	.357**	-.431**	.371*	.801	
Normative Commitment	3.46	.82	.104	.148*	.157*	.424**	-.535**	.421*	-.302**	.796

Notes: * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; Cronbach Alpha scores are presented on the diagonal.

5.2 STUDY LIMITATIONS

Although the study has made some important contributions to the theory and practice of career development, it has some minor limitations. The selected sample of employees consisted mainly of managerial level employees of BPO companies in Sri Lanka. Therefore, the study findings may be generalizable to other non-managerial employee categories and other industries. Similarly, these outcomes may not be the case for different country contexts since prior studies have shown that there are differences between countries in terms of attitudes and behaviors (Kickul *et al.*, 2004; Yu and Egri, 2005). Therefore, findings may not be generalized to other countries. The research was limited to a cross-sectional study. Therefore, as with all cross-sectional studies, no causality between variables is implied by this study.

5.3 FUTURE RESEARCH

Future studies could be conducted with a greater representation of different levels of employees in an organizational hierarchy to improve the generalizability of findings. In addition, to increase the generalizability, more studies in various industries representing diverse employee groups are needed. Moreover, similar studies should be conducted in other cultural contexts to further strengthen the knowledge in this research area. That is, some cross-cultural studies have identified differences between cultures in behavior and attitudes (Kickul *et al.*, 2004; Yu and Egri, 2005). Moreover, a qualitative study is worthwhile to provide further support for the findings of this study and to identify whether the found relationships are explained by national cultural dimensions. Chang (1999) found that career commitment mediates the relationship between employee perceptions of supervisor support and affective commitment. Therefore, another research avenue is to investigate career commitment as a mediator variable in the relationship between career self-management behaviors and organizational commitment. This study could be extended to other career self-management behaviors such as positioning behavior, influence behavior, and boundary management. Furthermore, future studies could consider cultural factors such as beliefs, values, and attitudes as moderating variables in the relationship between career self-management behaviors and employee outcome variables.

Table 2. Hierarchical regressions for the impact of CSMBs on commitment outcomes controlling for demographics.

Predictors (Beta)	Affective Commitment				Normative Commitment			
	Step 1	Step 2	Step 3	Step 4	Step 1	Step 2	Step 3	Step 4
Step 1								
Tenure	.211*				.157*			
Gender					.148*			
Step 2								
Tenure		.247*				.193*		
Gender						.147*		
Networking Behavior		.352*				.426*		
Step 3								
Tenure			.111				.091	
Gender							.143*	
Networking Behavior			.350*				.414*	
Mobility Behavior			-.402*				-.512*	
Step 4								
Tenure				.134*				.119
Gender								.147*
Networking Behavior				.349*				.405*
Mobility Behavior				-.400*				-.496*
Visibility Behavior				.348*				.397*
F Statistic	10.217*	10.584*	21.422*	17.329*	5.355*	5.985*	10.273*	.000*
Adj. R-Sq.	.140*	.180*	.217*	.228*	.138*	.164*	.175*	.188*
R-Sq. Change	.144	.144	.240	.314	.047	.025	.012	.013

Note: * $p < .05$

6. CONCLUSION

By providing implications to the theory of proactive behavior (Crant, 2000) and the extended model of social cognitive career theory (Lent and Brown, 2006), this study proposed that the employees' involvement with career self-management behaviors such as networking and visibility behaviors promote their affective commitment and normative commitment. Moreover, the results suggest that employees who involve with externally-oriented mobility behavior demonstrate low levels of affective and normative commitment. In sum, the results of this study suggest HR practitioners develop a conducive career development culture in that employees will actively involve in networking and visibility behaviors so that they will build an emotional attachment and a feeling of an obligation to further their careers within the organization.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

None.

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