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Article

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Nicole Torka, Jan Kees Looise, Maarten van Riemsdijk*

Commitment and the New Employment Relationship. Exploring a Forgotten Perspective: Employers Commitment**

In this article, we have endeavoured to integrate the concept 'employers' commitment' into the understanding of the new employment relationship. HRM scholars and practitioners assume that changes in (international) market and employee characteristics lead to a transformation of the employer-employee relationship: from a life-long, 'steady' relationship to life-time employability based on diminished job-security and enhanced employer and employee investments in training and development. We examine employees' internalisations with respect to this new relationship, or at least their identification with it. 'Employers commitment', a concept that has been neglected empirically to a large extent in management and work sciences, serves as the backbone of our argument, and refers to the commitment the employee receives from the employer. From the workers' perspective, 'employers' commitment' has everything to do with 'traditional' expectations about social aspects of the employer-employee relationship and with (individualised) employment relations. Concerning the latter, adequate 'direct participation' is the key. Since none of the employees mentioned any dimension of the so-called 'new deal' (e.g. job insecurity, training and career development, mobility) while describing their interpretation of 'employers commitment', (further) food for thought concerning the balance of the contemporary connection between employer and employee connection is presented.

Key words: **Employment Relationship, Reciprocity, Employee Commitment, Employer Commitment**

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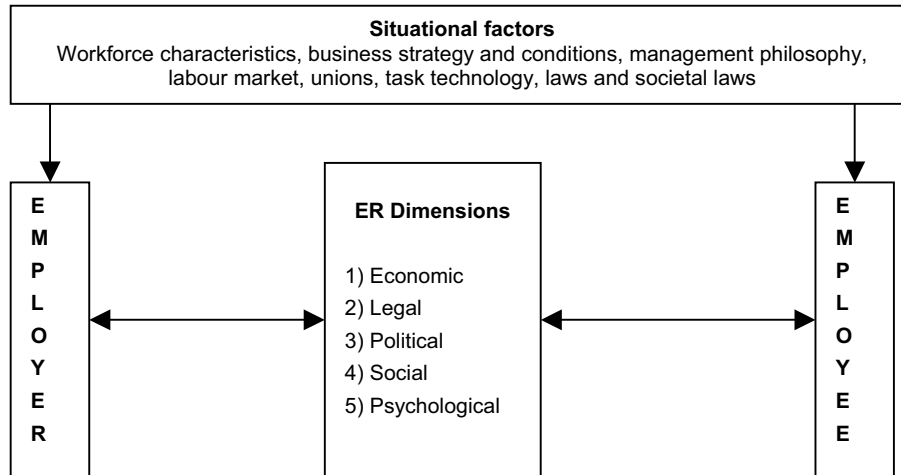
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1. Introduction: The modern commitment deal

Since the 1980s, many Human Resource Management scholars have supposed a change in the relationship between employers and employees: a so-called 'new deal'. Forced by (international) competition and increased customer demands, companies have revised the management of all resources for purposes of revitalising competitive advantage (e.g. Huiskamp et al. 2002; Huiskamp 2003). According to Bolwijn and Kumpe (1990), survival nowadays can be ensured by a combination of efficiency, quality, flexibility, and innovation. It is assumed that this renewal of management has a dual effect on the human dimension. On the one hand, in order to stimulate creativity and guarantee product quality, employers invest more in training and career development and employees do pioneering work in delineating their career paths. On the other hand, to increase economical efficiency, employees are expected to become more manoeuvrable inside and outside the organisation (Martin et al. 1998). Internal flexibility refers to working time and functional mobility, external flexibility to the use of temporary workers and outsourcing of employees (e.g. Atkinson 1984; Schilfgaarde/Cornelissen 1988). According to the literature, modern employers should offer the following deal: opportunities for valuable training and career development as well as a better fine-tuning of work and non-work obligations through work time flexibility in exchange for less job security (e.g. Tsui/Wu, 2005). To summarize the consequences: it is believed that the key features of the employment relationship (ER) have to change.

The employment relationship can be defined as a relationship based on an (implicit) reciprocal agreement in which employees provide manual and/or mental labour in exchange for (economic and social) rewards supplied by employers (Gospel/Palmer 1993; Lewis et al. 2003). The ER encompasses several aspects: economic, legal, political, social, and psychological ones. At least in Western Europe, monetary yields (economic dimension) as well as work time, labour contract, and health and safety at work are embedded in collective agreements and labour law (legal dimension). Both dimensions relate to material outcomes, the political and social dimensions to processes. Conditions of employment are, to a great extent, still an outcome of collective negotiations between employer and employee delegates (institutionalised political dimension). Within organisations, employer delegates and individual employees negotiate on the remaining margins, which cover all areas of Human Resource Management (individualised political dimension). Since 'real' human beings communicate about HRM policies and practices in both political dimensions, this interplay can be labelled 'social exchange' (social dimension). Finally, the psychological dimension refers to the psychological state of all individuals involved in the ER. The so-called '5th dimension' includes attitudes of managers (i.e. employer delegates) as well as attitudes of employees towards each other. This article focuses on the social and psychological dimensions of the ER. We will later elaborate on the mind-set of employer delegates and employees and work out whether or not these two mind-sets actually match. In other words: can we speak about a 'social equilibrium or cohesion' concerning the 'new ER deal'? The ER, and its situational factors, can be visualised as follows:

Figure 1: The employment relationship visualised (situational factors: Beer et al. 1984; Gospel/Palmer 1993; Lewis et al. 2003)



According to Boltanski and Chiapello (1999), company relations have changed into 'Cité par projets': from long-term 'mutual loyalty' relationships to short-term business connections based on projects. They propose that the so-called 'new deal' is lopsided. The 'new consciousness of capitalism' is defined by flexibility, mobility, creativity, and employee responsibility, and this dynamic determines employees' life-long employability. In other words, it is an employee's positioning within this dynamic that decides upon his or her usability on the labour market. For the employee this means that employability is not a voluntary choice based on emotional persuasion or identification, but based on necessity. Employees have to adapt.

A substantial number of HRM scholars assume that this switch has an impact on the psychological and social dimensions of the ER, and that these dimensions in turn influence each other. From the employer's perspective, expected contributions and offered inducements change from a (relational) mutual investment or overinvestment approach into a (calculative) underinvestment or quasi-spot contract (Tsui et al. 1995; Tsui et al. 1997; Tsui/Wang 2002; Tsui/Wu 2005). From the employee's perspective, obligations and entitlements (McLean Parks et al. 1998) no longer focus on desires in the context of the social exchange (balanced or relational psychological contract) but on desires based on economic exchange (transitional or transactional psychological contract) (Rousseau 1989; Rousseau 1995). Combining the psychological contracts of employers and employees allows us to sketch the social relationship between both parties. This relationship can then be described on a continuum from balanced to unbalanced.

The above-mentioned scholars have several points in common: for example, their designations for mental maps, mutual investment vs. relational and quasi-spot contract vs. transactional perspectives. They also assume that the change in ER has consequences for the bond employees have with their employer: their long-term relational

commitment towards the organisation - based on emotional attachment and/or normative conformity - suffers and is replaced by a (short-term) calculative or transactional commitment based on economic exchange and shrinking alternatives on the external labour market. Recent research has shown however that this idea is not necessarily true: even contingent workers can develop emotional attachments towards a company, and their commitment can be as strong as that of their colleagues with a permanent contract (e.g. Allegro/Van Breukelen 2000; Pearce 1993; Torka 2004).

In the meantime, much has been said and some research has been done on employee commitment within the new ER, mostly focused on different labour contracts. However, what has never been examined is the organisation's commitment towards employees under these changing premises: Has the commitment an employee receives from the employer changed, and if so, how? We simply don't know. And our lack of knowledge concerning employer's commitment goes beyond the proposed present state of transition in ER. It concerns employers' commitment in general, as this subject has been all but neglected in empirical inquiry. As employees are the object of employers' commitment, it is necessary to take on the employee's perspective: employees will judge their employer's commitment and, based on their perceptions, react psychologically (e.g. change their own commitment) and, consequently, react physically (e.g. productive or counterproductive behaviour). With this understanding, we will try to disentangle employees' views on the contemporary employment relationship: What does 'good' and 'bad' employer commitment, that is, employer-ship, mean nowadays? Furthermore, we will try to determine whether or not the mind-sets of employers and employees are balanced: do employers fulfil their employees' expectations and can we attribute these expectations to the old or new employment relationship, or maybe both? In this paper, we want to address three main questions:

- (1) Referring to present and traditional employment relationships, what are the features of 'old' and 'new' style employers' commitment?
- (2) Do recent conceptualisations of employer commitment reflect the new, the old or a combination of both employment relationship(s)?
- (3) Do findings from empirical inquiry on employer commitment reflect the new employment relationship?

We will begin by presenting definitions of employer and employee commitment as well as two types of employer commitment found in the era of the employment relationship: Employer commitment old and new style. Then, we will summarize the recent conceptualisations of employers' commitment and discuss them in the context of the two types of employers' commitment (section 2). In section 3, we will confront the assumed change in ER and the aforementioned theoretical considerations with actual employee perceptions. Finally, the content and equilibrium of employers' commitment will be discussed, before highlighting consequences for practice and theory.

2. Employers commitment and the new employment relationship: an exploration

For more than three decades, tremendous effort has been put into clarifying the concept 'commitment', and determining its relationships with antecedents, correlates and

outcomes. This focus of attention is not surprising, as commitment is seen as a significant force among those that help explain employee motivation (Meyer et al. 2002). However, this effort is still one-sided: research is focused on 'employee commitment'; knowledge about 'employer commitment' lacks. This situation is somewhat confusing, as commitment can be seen as a psychological state based on reciprocity: You don't get something for nothing. For employee commitment this means: The employer cannot expect any commitment from employees without expressing some kind of commitment towards them. Therefore, before discussing employer commitment 'old' and 'new' style, we have to sort out what employers' commitment means.

2.1 *Employers commitment: a general definition*

Commitment is a force that binds an individual to a course of action of relevance to one or more targets (Meyer/Herscovitch 2001:302).

'Binding' refers to the maintenance of the relationship with the commitment object and is seen as the most important outcome of commitment (e.g. Meyer et al. 2002). Thus, committed individuals stick to the object(s) of their commitment. As is the case in private life, many individuals have several, sometimes conflicting commitments in work life, such as those towards work, profession, career, colleagues, department, and the organisation as a whole. There are different forces that can compel an individual to a particular course of action. We may do so because we like it (affective bonding), because we feel obliged (normative conformity) and/or because people have good reasons for their commitment (rational choice) (Allen/Meyer 1990). So, based on what we know about employee commitment, what does 'employer commitment' mean? Derived from the above-cited definition, 'employer commitment' could be defined as follows:

Employer commitment is a mind-set that binds the employer to courses of action of relevance to employees.

Three aspects of this definition need some further explanation: (1) who is the employer, (2) what is the content of the mind-set, and (3) what are courses of action? We can distinguish between bureaucratic and human relation aspects of employer-ship. The bureaucratic aspect of employer-ship refers to all pragmatic aspects, such as the organisational structure, buildings, and regulations. It could be argued that all aspects of the employment contract (e.g. payments, function) are the rationales of employer ship, but we assume that they are not more and not less than an outcome of negotiations between living beings, namely employer delegates and employees. Thus, the employer is represented by real human beings: (top) managers and direct supervisors. Since it is not the abstract employer that has a mind-set towards employees, but the living delegates who represent the employer, we assume that employers' commitment is reflected in the attitudes and behaviours of employer delegates. This also means that employers are only as good as their representatives are: due to their pursuit of a particular goal or lack of information, employee delegates do not necessarily act in correspondence with company policies. Thus, the employer can be better or worse than the delegates suggest. Finally, the likelihood that employees qualify executives as employer representatives depends on the attribution of authority and responsibility. Therefore, from the standpoint of the employee, communication about these issues is essential for determining executives' actual scope and position (see also Guest/Conway 2002).

We don't believe that the nature of commitment taken on by employers is the same as the one taken on by employees. The bureaucratic employer acts as calculative or rational actor. The employer has to invest in employees to get the work done. Fostering employee commitment is a means to evoking productive behaviour, which is the actual aim in this concession. Therefore, contrary to employee commitment, employers' commitment is unidimensional. Employers have good reasons to act according to the reciprocity norm in a way that meets employee interests: norms provide punishments for those who violate them (Becker 1960; Wiener 1982). Employer delegates may develop emotional attachment (affective commitment) towards individual employees, but delegates 'on duty' act according to the same internalised normative pressures that the abstract employer does. Of course, it is possible that personal affection influences delegates' decisions concerning HRM and this then influences employee's perception about their employers' commitment.

Finally, courses of action refer to all behaviours the employer displays towards employees. These behaviours are manifested in HRM policies and especially in practices. Within each HRM domain, fixed bureaucratic arrangements as well as more fluid margins do exist. For instance, establishing a work council may be mandatory, and the contents and authorities may be fixed, but the communication process concerning consultation may have a large degree of freedom (margin). Therefore, if well-informed, employees will not pin work council laws onto delegates, but rather the way delegates utilise the given margins. And this applies to the whole map of the territory of HRM. To recapitulate, employees' will experience 'employers' commitment' if the employer (delegates) discharges its obligation to offer HRM policies tailored to employee interests. In the next paragraph, we will focus on HRM that may foster employees' perception of employer commitment.

2.2 Courses of action: a further exploration of HRM policies and practices

Several scholars do in fact mention 'employers' commitment' and, while doing so, refer to HRM policies and practices. According to Miller and Lee (2001: 165), authors such as Huselid (1995) and Arthur (1994) state that *committed companies* adopt 'high commitment work systems': they invest more than non-committed employers do in employee development, good working conditions and challenging jobs, fair and ample compensation, satisfying information sharing and forms of participation and, finally, offer employment security (p. 165). To sum up: employers' commitment is evidenced by a so-called outstanding bundle of HRM practices.

Eisenberger's (1986) Perceived Organisational Support (POS) construct is also of relevance for the identification of HRM that may signify 'employer commitment'. Eisenberger's (2005, cited) POS theory holds that (a) employees form general beliefs concerning how much the organization values their contributions and cares about their well-being (POS), and (b) based on the norm of reciprocity, employees reciprocate such support with affective commitment to the organization (e.g. Rhoades et al. 2001), and, consequently, with productive behaviour. With its introduction in 1986, the authors stated that 'the present research investigates processes involved in employees' interferences concerning the organization's commitment to them ...' (Eisenberger et al. 1986: 500). Thus, *POS signifies Employers commitment*. Research indicates that

employee commitment and POS are not only distinct measures, but also that POS is a better predictor of employee behaviour (i.e. organisational citizenship behaviour) than employee commitment (McFarlane Shore/Wayne 1993). This result allows us to conclude that employer commitment may in fact explain employee behaviour better than employees' own commitment.

The original Survey of Perceived Organisational Support (SPOS) consists of 36 statements and evaluated contributions which refer to participation as well as fair pay, performance, appreciation of employee's extra effort, full use of employee's talents, and many more (see Eisenberger et al. 1986: 502). This list shows how certain HRM practices can be seen as a course of action of employer commitment. It needs to be mentioned, however, that, in a later article, Rhoades and Eisenberger (2002) give HRM policies (as well as fairness and supervisor support) an antecedent role. Having now dissected the construct 'employer commitment', we will proceed to consider the employment relationship - the HRM content under old and new premises - in the next paragraph.

2.3 Employment relationships and employer commitment 'old' and 'new' style

Scholars assume that employee interests, and therefore their view on employer commitment, change under the so-called new employment contract: today more urgently than yesterday, employers demand mentally and physically manoeuvrable employees. Therefore, we believe that employee needs – reflected in what they assume 'excellent' HRM policies and practices to be – have to undergo a transformation in this direction. That is, if employees do, in fact, adjust to the new employer demands.

According to Beer and colleagues (1984), HR policies can be divided into four major parts: (1) human resource flow, (2) work system, (3) rewards, and (4) employee influence. The status quo of the employment relationship and corresponding indications of employer commitment are reflected in the company actions within these distinctive policy areas. The 'labour contract for life' is replaced by a 'contract for job' (inflow). The employee will be employed as long as he or she adds value to the organisation (Hiltrop 1995: 289). In return, the employee has developed a changed set of expectations concerning what employers owe them in terms of training and development, assistance in labour market replacement, task content, (fringe-) benefits, and labour relations. We will elaborate on these proposed changes.

Employees need to gain recognisable skills and qualifications to enhance their usability on the internal and external labour market (Lewis et al. 2003:13). Thus, training and development activities (flow through) have to be broad and not only function- or company related. Since redundancy and non-permanent contracts seem to be a normal rather than anomalous part of work life, employers' responsibilities concerning departure (outflow) have changed. In the Netherlands, this is evidenced by the increase in (private) outplacement agencies that offer training in personal skills as well as reorientation and replacement before departure. In the past, after dismissal, employees had to depend on the (governmental) labour office for replacement, without (financial) participation from their former employer. To ensure life-long employability, career skills and knowledge have to be up-to date. For the task content this means: job enrichment (intrinsically challenging, interesting, and important work) has to substitute job broad-

ening. ‘New’ employers offer a narrow set of economic inducements based on short-term performance. Since life-time employment is less self-evident, function and seniority related pay should be replaced by performance related pay (a fair day’s work for a fair day’s pay). Furthermore, the increased probability of employer and sector change argues for an enhanced transferability of certain benefits such as pension rights. Finally, the contemporary employee population is more divers than in the past. They have different (fringe-) benefit needs and therefore ‘a la carte’ systems are desirable (Huiskamp et al. 2002).

Finally, compared to bygone days and evidenced by a decreasing degree of union membership, employee influence has to be more an individual than a collective case: Employees want to share their opinions directly and not through delegates. However, it is believed that employees should have responsibility not only for more task decisions, but, similarly, should have greater opportunities to express their views and solve problems on a wider range of issues (Beer et al. 1984). This means that they seek a more direct influence on all HR areas that affect them personally (e.g. flow, work system, rewards). The aim of enhanced (direct) employee influence has not changed over the years: it continues to aim at increasing employee commitment and thereby, increasing behaviours that contribute to organisational effectiveness (Ramsay 1991). The underlying employer faith has however changed: effectiveness through (specific individual) professionalisation as opposed to (general collective) democratisation. Certainly concerning the work system, employees are seen as experts in performing their tasks who should have voice. In this way, the organisation as a whole can benefit from employees task knowledge. We can visualise the features of employer commitment ‘old’ and ‘new’ style as follows.

Table 1: Features of employer commitment ‘old’ and ‘new’ style

HR-outcomes Employer Commitment	Old	New
HUMAN RESOURCE FLOW - Inflow - Flow through - Outflow	Permanent job security Function and company related training and development Government intervention	Permanent employability Broad investment in external usable training and development (privatised) Outplacement
WORK SYSTEM	Job broadening	Job enrichment
REWARDS	Function and seniority related pay Collective benefits Non-transferability of benefits	Performance related pay A la carte benefits Transferability of benefits
EMPLOYEE INFLUENCE	General collective democratisation	Specific individual professionalisation

Table 1 summarises what employees would regard as actions reflecting employer commitment under old and new circumstances. However, do employees really identify with this employer driven switch in employment relationship? Before addressing this question in section 3, we will elaborate on the ‘best HRM practices’ and POS approach (section 2.2) of employer commitment: which period of the employment relationship do they reflect? Within the first approach, a mixed understanding of the employment rela-

tionship is evident. Emphasising the importance of employment security for perceived employer commitment indicates that 'old' norms and values are still undamaged (Miller/Lee 2001). 'Challenging jobs', evidenced by autonomy, variety, job enrichment and so on, represent employer commitment new style since such a work system can enhance employability. All the other elements of Miller and Lee's definition of employer commitment (good working conditions, fair and ample compensation, satisfying information sharing and participation) are rather indefinite, universally phrased. Thus, it is not possible to attribute these facets to employer commitment old or new style.

A comparable conclusion can be drawn for the 'execution' of the POS construct. The formulation of the statements concerning rewards and employee influence are rather broad or universal, than specific 'spirit to the age'. However, one item refers to job enrichment - 'the organisation tries to make my job as interesting as possible' - and another to 'flow through', emphasising the assumed importance of in-firm employability: 'The organisation provides me little opportunity to move up the ranks'. The 'strength' of the labour contract is also a subject in the original questionnaire: 'The organisation feels there is little to be gained by employing me for the rest of my career' and 'It would take only a small decrease in my performance for the organisation to want to replace me'. Both items refer to transactional employer attitudes towards its employees. In other words: if employees agree, the organisation's support is weak. Thus, job insecurity also means low employer commitment in the POS approach. Like Miller and Lee, Eisenberger and colleagues share the view that all HRM policies are relevant for employers' commitment, but without considering differences in periods or employee interests. This suggests that these scholars have not changed their mental-set concerning the employment relationship: employee needs remain stable despite changing employer demands.

After presenting the (theoretical) types of employer commitment and reviewing scholars' conceptualisations of this concept, one question still remains: what is the employee perspective? The next paragraph is devoted to their view.

3. Employers commitment: an employee view

We explored the following questions from the standpoint of the employee: which HRM policies and practices signify employers' commitment and do these perceptions point to a new, old or mixed understanding of the employment relationship? We received first insights into these topics during a case-study research on the relationship between labour contracts (permanent contracts and different forms of non-permanent arrangements including agency work) and commitment among metalworkers. Since the results of the few recent investigations contradict each other and the employee voice concerning this subject matter is largely missing, it was decided to adopt between-method triangulation (Denzin 1978), involving contrasting research methods including questionnaire research. For purposes of this article, the relevant findings are the ones collected through semi-structured interviews and observations.

This research was done in two metal companies and *walking and talking the floor* was practised for several months. In addition, 54 semi-structured interviews with low- and medium skilled fitters and welders were completed. 22 of the 54 participants had a permanent contract. Since the Dutch equivalent to commitment ('betrokkenheid') is

linguistically well-established, - people use it to explain their devotion to something or somebody like “I’m committed to my football club” -, it was possible to ask participants about commitment directly and pose five questions. Two of the five questions deem special mention. When asked about commitment in general (What does commitment mean to you?) and about commitment towards the company (What does commitment towards ... (name of the company) mean to you?), many men challenged our initial mind-set, which was based on employee commitment literature: they saw themselves as the object rather than the subject of commitment; they talked about their employer’s commitment towards them. This part of the research seemed to influence employees’ frame of reference: while the researcher was still within the company - present on the shop floor – the metalworkers started to share perceptions on commitment with each other and her during informal conversations. They used this notion to explain their own and other’s behaviour. Concerning the latter, they judged employer’s commitment using and showing living examples. Finally, we also interviewed the HR manager, two production managers, four work council members, and six direct supervisors in order to gather information on HRM policies from their point of view.

The received information about employers’ commitment was more or less a side-product of the research and restricted to a specific employee group. Thus, external generalisation pretensions are restricted. We therefore decided to explore this subject in two research projects, using different occupational groups, namely: social workers (Bachelor or Master Degree in social work, nursing, psychology and/or health sciences,) and fire-fighters (medium-skilled workers). Forty semi-structured interviews were done (twenty within each group). After addressing employee’s own commitment – (a) what does commitment mean to you, (b) to what are you committed in work and private life, and (c) could you rank your commitment in order of importance?, the focus was on employer commitment. Two questions were asked: what does employer commitment mean to you and could you mention examples of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ employer commitment?

3.1 The findings: metalworkers

When talking about employers’ commitment, although the actual aim had been an exploration of employee commitment, only two fitters mentioned unfair pay. Comparing themselves with R&D department employees, they perceived their salary as too low. After all, according to them, the fitters repeatedly had to adapt R & D inventions in order to make them work and had to advise them on a regular basis. In other words, for both men, unfair pay expresses low employer commitment. All the other metalworkers (24 out of 26) that mentioned employers’ commitment referred to something else. The interviews revealed that courses of action concerning *employee influence* determine perceived employers’ commitment. Thus, the employer can prove his/her commitment by allowing adequate information exchange and *direct* voice and participation. Two examples:

A committed employee is someone who consults in case of problems [employee commitment]. Employees should get the freedom to solve problems ‘higher up’ independently, for example: discuss it with the drawing office. That grants trust and recognition from the company towards the worker [employers’ commitment]. If there are problems he passes them on and rectifies them [employee commitment].

What is the company? Everybody who sits above [the office is located above the production]. They arrange the business. You don't really notice it, you don't belong to them. They tell you the most important things during the department meetings. What you have to know, you get to know. You're not committed immediately, but through a middleman, you're not there personally. I'm only a fitter, maybe this is what they think. I'm on the job daily, at the department. It is commitment if the whole company is involved. When the organisation tells us something through the boss and he informs me, that's commitment. The organisation cannot do it directly, there are too many people to do so. I'm less, medium, committed towards the company than towards my work or department. The quality training is at the organisation. That is above. They also asked my opinion about quality improvement. That's a good case: they got me committed then.

During the observations, other behaviour responsible for perceived employers' commitment was revealed. For the welders and fitters, employer's commitment is reflected in *decent treatment in daily encounters*. They judge the way employer delegates treat them: do they greet while passing the production hall, do they make any (eye-) contact, how do they dress, and do they really listen to what we say? To them, employer delegates are not only executives like (top) managers and direct supervisors, but all white-collar workers. They attribute mistreatment (or 'just' ignorance) from subordinate clerical workers like accountants and secretaries to the employing organisation as a whole: "because they organise, they work for the organisation". It is obvious that workers with a permanent contract are more likely to be dissatisfied with their employer's commitment than non-permanent workers. Thus, the two companies in which the research took place did seem to go beyond the expectations of their temporary workers. All supervisors (collaborating foremen) and managers from both companies reported that they employ equal practices concerning direct employee influence. Through their long experience with atypical workers (more than 20 years), they learned that many atypical workers build up extensive working experience, skills and tacit knowledge at many companies. Since they discovered that this can help the company to enhance quality and save costs, both companies trigger knowledge transfer through direct employee influence successfully. But, as shown by the above statements, this doesn't mean that participation can be classified as excellent. The foremen also criticise the participation practices in general, when asked about company commitment:

I feel a part of ... (name company), because they involve me on many things. They put a high value on my opinion: the management team, the director, the direct boss, and the boys at assembly. The boys feel less committed because they receive less information. Commitment has to do with information transfer.

The executive organisation has to be more committed towards the company. I have the feeling that the managers are afraid to put things on paper. Once the managers forgot to tell us about new cabs. As a result we didn't use the cabs for the intended machines. With one word: communication. The managers have to improve their communication.

As a result of these findings, we can conclude neither that 'HRM best practices' nor the POS concept (see paragraph 2.2) reflect employers' commitment in a way appropriate for these employees. The employee perception is much stricter than the scholars' perception: only pay, direct employee influence, and decent treatment in general seem relevant. What these workers interpret as employers' commitment can be subsumed within another prominent construct from the work sciences, an antecedent of

POS: *Organisational justice or fairness*. Unfair pay means ‘distributive injustice’ as well as limited voice if employees perceive that comparable others have more to say. ‘Procedural justice’ is concerned with the fairness of the decision-making process, the employee influence.’ Interpersonal justice’ reflects the degree to which people are treated with politeness, dignity, and respect, and ‘informational justice’ has to do with adequate information sharing (Colquitt et al. 2001). So, for the metalworkers, fairness theory seems relevant. It is of course possible that other occupations see things differently. For example, Martin and colleagues (1998) conclude that, contrary to blue-collar workers, white-collar workers see training and development as a part of a natural process of life-long learning. Therefore, it seems logical that other populations have a different understanding of employer’s commitment, that is, of the things the employer owes them. But is this in fact true?

3.2 The findings: fire-fighters and social workers

The three occupational groups have more in common than one might think. None of the fire-fighters and social workers linked employers’ commitment to human resource flow issues (contract, training, career development, and outplacement) or rewards. As was the case for the metalworkers, the task content only played a subordinate role: it came up in relationship with direct employee influence. The social workers report that they have less influence over their tasks and especially over their task load. An example:

We have to produce as much as possible. That’s something, you’re a graduated nurse and everything is all about production, that’s truly conflicting. The production is more important than anything else. Sometimes we have two groups and within each group eight people. Sometimes a group consists of seven people and some of them are really difficult. That’s more than enough, certainly on the weekend, because you work on your own. But the production has to go on and on. I expect from them that that they think with us and say ‘no, we have an admission freeze for this weekend’. That’s commitment, which is consultation. I think that they have to take our opinions seriously, because we work here 24-7. We know what’s going on. I miss that.

Contrary to the metalworkers and social workers, the fire-fighters do not refer to the work system. This is not surprising, as the employer has no direct influence on the task content. The tasks are determined by external circumstances, that is, by fires, accidents and so on.

All occupational groups mention *decent treatment in daily encounters* and judge the behaviour of employer delegates similarly: managers and clerical workers are too distant; they are physically and mentally absent, remote from the ‘core business’. Metalworkers, fire-fighters, and social workers express strong ‘us-and-them’ attitudes and refer to cultural clashes. A fire-fighter said:

When the officers start their civil carrier, the first two weeks they are with us. They run 24 hour services with us, they are on the fire engine, and we share our bedrooms with them. After the initial two weeks they go upstairs (the office is located above the fire station). Then they change, they have to change if they want to belong. There are rumours about three transferred officers. It is said that they had to leave because they were too close with us.

Thus, us-and-them attitudes affect the perceived treatment negatively. In other words: without verbal and non-verbal proximity, these employees will not experience satisfying voice and employers’ commitment. In sum: not only for metalworkers, but also

for other occupational groups, *justice*, and in particular, *interpersonal justice*, seems to symbolise employers' commitment. From the standpoint of the employee, without polite and respectful treatment from employers' delegates, perceived adequate direct employee influence and employers commitment remain a mission impossible.

4. Final considerations

4.1 Discussion

One could argue that our knowledge is still too limited - restricted to three of so many occupational groups - for generalisations or fundamental discussions about what employers owe their employees in order to fulfil their reciprocal commitment deal. Our findings and conclusions could be criticised with reference to the way we questioned participants, as the majority of participants relate commitment to social relations on the work floor and not to business deals. In other words: a material dimension of employers' commitment is almost absent. To a certain extent this may be true, but what nevertheless stands out is the following: it is implicitly assumed by different scholars (section 2.2) that employers' commitment affects employee behaviour stronger than employee commitment. Therefore, we cannot ignore the employees' view, because they judge their employer's commitment, and will act on this judgement, both mentally and physically. In other words: if employers want to get as much commitment out of their employees as possible, they have to understand their employees. Without knowledge about what moves their employees, a match between employer investments and employee needs is almost impossible. Our research participants do not reflect the 'new employee'. They still expect employer efforts that could be named 'traditional'. Despite the fact that they consider themselves experts on their specific task and believe they should be able to influence their task because of this - a belief that can also be attributed to new employees -, these beliefs are based on the universal human needs for politeness, respect, and dignity, (*interpersonal justice*) and not employer demands for optimal organisational effectiveness and employability. It is possible that some ("wanna-be") professional or managerial employees internalise their organisation's rationales and corresponding norms through family, peer group, educational or organisational socialisation, but our participants did not. Therefore, at least for these occupational groups, (HR) management should recover what they perceive as 'good' HRM policies and practices and, as a consequence, employer commitment, before investing in interventions which may be ineffective, such as competence management. Thus, management should first map out and meet employee interests, and these interests seem to have everything to do with justice. Putting effort into 'motivating' the behaviour of employees can only contribute to perceived employer commitment if these efforts also respond to the limits set by employees.

4.2 Conclusion

When we juxtapose the employee view of employers' commitment with that of employers and scholars, we must conclude that perspectives are far away from equilibrium: the employer-employee relationship is rather unbalanced than balanced. The employee's understanding does not reflect 'the new deal'. Our employees seem still to be coping with old management ailments, invisibility and deaf-mutism, and this ag-

gravates the communication necessary for perceived employers' commitment. In sum: the employee is a less rational actor than the employer and claims relational concern.

Within the current state of affairs, employer delegates should first ask themselves if they deserve any attachment before judging their employees' commitment. Contrary to what Tsui and Wu (2005) assume, we believe that employers want some commitment from *all* (permanent and non-permanent) employees, and if it is 'only' rational based commitment reflecting low alternatives and/or investments, then it is not important why they care (affective bonding, normative conformity, or cost-based), but simply THAT they care in order to prevent contra-productive behaviour. Furthermore, and maybe more important for individual and societal well-being, employer commitment also protects employees from the harmful consequences of inadequate communication and lack of social support, such as stress and burn-out.

Finally, from a rather unexplored perspective, it may be beneficial for some employees to identify with or at least be aware of the employers' new deal. For those who suffer from the 'crazy about your work' virus, being aware of the new employers' perspective on employment relationships could help to come to the early realisation that work is 'only' work. For their own good, it is important not to expect relational "hugs" from the employer and its delegates.

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