

ANALYSIS OF THE RELATION BETWEEN SUBJECTIVE CAREER SUCCESS, ORGANIZATIONAL COMMITMENT AND THE INTENTION TO LEAVE THE ORGANIZATION

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Abstract

This study proposes to analyze the relation between subjective success, the affective and continuance components of organizational commitment and the intention to leave the organization, in order to reflect the repercussions on organizational and individual levels. Despite the increasing importance of the organizational commitment and the relevance of subjective success in the current context of the professional careers, a gap exists in specialized literature. The hypotheses were tested by means of a structural equations model and it has been observed that individual perception of the success achieved in professional careers has a positive relation to affective commitment and a negative relation to employees' continuance commitment. The relation between these two types of commitment and the intention to leave are those anticipated in the current literature. Finally, contextualising the present paradigm shift in psychological contracts and the profiles of a professional career, the implications of this study on human resources policies are considered and future lines of investigation are suggested.

1. Introduction

For more than three decades, scientific literature (Mathieu and Zajac, 1990; Meyer *et al.*, 2002) has been reflecting the importance of organizational commitment. With the exception of some critical contributions (Baruch, 1998), and regardless of the contextual changes that have occurred as well as the alteration to psychological contracts (Rousseau, 1989; Rousseau and Wade-Benzoni, 1995), present empirical evidence seems to continue to stress the importance of organizational commitment (Meyer *et al.*, 2002; Luchak and Gellatly, 2007). That is to say, from the point of view of employees, organizational commitment can lead to greater self-esteem and greater psychological well-being, which affects the organization (Escrig-Tena, Roca and Bou, 2002). For the organization, to have committed employees implies, among other positive aspects, higher performance, lower cost associated to voluntary absenteeism, lower indices of counter-productive behaviour, greater citizen behaviour, lower turnover of personnel and therefore a greater capacity to retain talent (Mathieu and Zajac, 1990; Meyer and Allen, 1997; Meyer and Herscovitch, 2001; Meyer, Stanley, Herscovitch, and Topolnytsky, 2002). In this way, society in general tends to benefit from the fact that organizations have committed employees, in terms of greater national productivity and efficiency at work (Mathieu and Zajac, 1990).

In the same way, in recent years, the fight for talent has become a very important factor in the current organizational context (Somaya and Williamson, 2008). Attracting, retaining and assuring the satisfaction of key employees constitutes one of the fundamental factors in obtaining sustainable competitive advantages. Therefore, promoting organizational commitment of talented workers ensures a higher level of intellectual capital in organizations (Ulrich, 1998) and lasting returns. In a similar way, according to Judge, Cable, Boudreau and Bretz (1995), organizations are more effective if they promote the psychological success of their employees, that is to say, the more effective are those that have employees with greater intrinsic satisfaction with their professional careers, as well as objective progress. Previously, the existing literature has concentrated mainly on the objective aspects of professional careers, but in the present context, subjective success perceived by employees has gained in importance (DeVos, Dewettnick and Buyens, 2008), although it is still a developing subject for investigation.

With regard to records on organizational commitment, investigations conducted by Lee (1971), Mowday *et al.* (1982) and Steers (1977), confirmed later by meta-analyses by Mathieu and Zajac (1990) and Meyer *et al.* (2002), observed three categories that included: personal variables (*i.e.*, age, gender, level of education, seniority), variables associated to the work and its purpose (*i.e.*, ambiguity of the work, level of autonomy, timetable, workload, career mobility), and variables associated with structural factors (social participation, personal importance and training). All of these have displayed different empirical results in degrees of significance and relation, using the different policies of human resources as a base (Smeenk *et al.*, 2006). However, in spite of the impact suggested in relation to the satisfaction on the part of employees with their

professional career in organizational spheres, there are few empirical investigations that back this up. For this reason, and given the importance of organizational commitment as a precedent for many desirable behaviours in organizations, we asked ourselves if a connection exists, and of what type, between subjective success of employees and their organizational commitment. In this way, we tried to fill in a substantial gap in current specialized literature, as well as analyze possible future lines and practical implications for policies in human resources.

In order to undertake the study, an empirical investigation has been carried out with 150 participants, which allowed us to test the hypotheses through a model of structural equations. Given that organizational commitment constitutes one of the central predictors of intention to leave an organization (Meyer and Herscovitch, 2001), when opting to extend the model this variable was included, allowing in this way confirming relations already outlined in several preceding studies (Mathieu and Zajac, 1990; Meyer *et al.*, 2002). The remainder of this article is structured as follows: an introduction of the theoretical framework is presented, where we consider the hypotheses of work, followed by the methodology to follow where the techniques of analysis used are reflected. Finally, the results are presented and discussed, and we conclude by analyzing the future limitations of this investigation, as well as future lines and the possible practical implications on human resources policies.

2. Theoretical framework and hypotheses

Recent decades have been characterized by deep transformations in the labour world, such as globalisation, rapid technological advances, an increase in competitive pressures, a reduction in the job security and the democratization of labour life (Gratton and Ghoshal, 2003). In the West, and in particular in Europe, increasing emphasis has been made to policies of human resources that attempt to attract and improve intellectual resources in order to create sustainable competitive advantages (Powell and Snellman, 2004). Due to this, several authors (Arthur, Hall and Lawrence, 1989; Arthur, Inkson and Pringle, 1999; Arthur and Rousseau, 1996; Hall, 2002; Hall, 2004) have highlighted a paradigm shift, from traditional career models (Super, 1957; Levinson, 1958) to emergent ones, like boundary less and protean careers (Hall, 2002, 2004; Arthur and Rousseau, 1996), in whose context individuals have become architects of their own vocational destinies (Bell and Staw, 1989).

Gradually and in parallel, a change in psychological contracts has taken place. That is to say, from relational psychological contracts, which follow an indefinite commitment based on trust between those involved, to transactional psychological contracts, which entail a limited implication from both sides and tend to concentrate more on immediate, direct benefits than on interest in a long term relationship (Rousseau, 1989; Rousseau and Wade-Benzoni, 1995). This paradigm shift, which is linked to high mobility and greater employee autonomy (Sullivan, 1999; Hall, 2002), could bring about a reduction in organizational commitment and, as a consequence, in outcomes which are classically encouraged by policies in human resources. Therefore,

in this new paradigm, where a certain individualism prevails, it would be wise to reconsider the possible background of organizational commitment beyond that is usually studied and to link it more to the perspective of employees' individual satisfaction and therefore to structural factors; that is to say, those such as the perception of professional success which can imply some degree of employee satisfaction towards the organization, and as a result, greater commitment.

As with organizational commitment, career success has been a subject of scientific interest and has been applied as much from an individual perspective as an organizational one (Hall, 1976, 2002; Ng *et al.*, 2005). At an individual level, classically, the perception of professional success has tied in with satisfaction with lifestyle, individual well-being and mental health (Hall, 1976, 2002). At the same time, at an organizational level, individual success has predominantly been suggested as being coincident with the success of the company (Judge *et al.*, 1999). Different studies have concentrated on examining the background and consequences of professional success (Aryee, Chay and So, 1994; Parasuraman, Purohit, Godshalk and Beutell, 1996; Allen, Lentz and Day, 2006). In the meta-analysis by Ng, Eby, Sorensen and Feldman (2005) on predicting professional success, one can observe that in the majority of the studies professional success is conceptualized from two perspectives: objective and subjective.

Objective success refers to verifiable results, such as salary, promotion and status, indicators that for a long time have been considered as signs of professional success from the point of view of society. On the other hand, subjective or psychological career success is determined by individuals, as a result of experience in practising their professional careers. In fact, subjective success is defined as the apprehension and internal evaluation by an individual of his or her professional career, through any dimension considered important for this individual, usually operating as the satisfaction of the individual with his or her professional career (Judge *et al.*, 1995; Judge, Higgins, Thoresen and Barrick, 1999; Khapova and Wilderom, 2006). Therefore, it depends on a subjective evaluation by the individual in relation to his or her own career objectives and expectations (Seibert, Kraimer and Crant, 2001), which reflects the importance of a personal set of values, attitudes and objectives in order to judge the success achieved in their own professional career.

A subjective exploration of professional careers has been and continues to be increasingly opportune, due to changes that have taken place in the present socio-economic context (Arthur, Khapova and Wilderom, 2005; Mirvis and Hall, 1996). Decades ago, careers, that we today call traditional careers, were usually developed in very structured and essentially hierarchical organizations, in which success was defined and based on salary differences, raises and promotions. On the other hand, in an organizational context where the only constant is permanent change, characterized by constant technological advances and increasingly globalised organizational surroundings with a reduction in innovative cycles, people are less dependent on organizations to manage their professional careers (Hall, 2002). Individuals undergo

more inter-organizational mobility and acquire greater protagonism in decisions about their careers (Hall and Chandler, 2005). Consequently, measures of subjective success or other variables of individual character, such as the capacity to adapt and learn, are acquiring greater importance in today's environment.

At the same level of relevance, we have to place organizational commitment, defined as a force that binds an individual to a course of action, which can be a process such as belonging to an organization (Mathieu and Zajac, 1990; Meyer and Herscovitch, 2001; Mowday *et al.*, 1982). Principally, the literature has characterized and accepted two types of organizational commitment: affective commitment and continuance commitment (Allen and Meyer, 1990; Meyer and Allen, 1991; Luchak and Gellatly, 2007). Nevertheless, we could add a third dimension related to the obligation of an individual to remain in an organization due to normative pressures (Wiener, 1982). However, the difficulty in distinguishing this from affective commitment in the empirical field (Allen and Meyer, 1990) continues to bring about a lively debate in the scientific community in relation to its validity as a differentiating component (Bergman, 2006). This is the reason why recent investigations (Luchak and Gellatly, 2007) have concentrated solely on affective commitment and continuance commitment, which are the components associated to different motivation mindsets, thus having distinct behavioural consequences.

With regard to the two dimensions of organizational commitment, affective commitment refers to the affective bond that an individual feels towards an organization, characterized by the individual's identification and implication with the organization, as well as with the feeling of pleasure of being a part of it (Allen and Meyer, 1990; Meyer and Allen, 1997; Mowday *et al.*, 1982). These individuals with high affective commitment are characterized by having strong intrinsic motivation and a strong focus on promotion (Higgins, 1998; Meyer, Becker and Vandenberghe, 2004). This set of motivations causes a desire to arise in these individuals to operate at maximum levels of performance and fulfilment with organizational objectives (Meyer *et al.*, 2002), in terms, for example, of greater work performance, low levels of unwarranted absenteeism, which is to say an eagerness to obtain advances and gains, as well as to remain in the organization (Meyer, Stanley, Herscovitch and Topolonsky, 2002). Therefore, the relation between affective commitment and the intention to leave an organization should show a significant, negative relation.

H1: There is a negative and significant relation between affective commitment and the intention to leave the organization.

Continuance commitment responds to a set of different motivations than affective commitment. Whereas affective commitment has a purely emotional origin, continuance commitment is associated to forms of relationships based on the cost evaluation associated to binding choices or *side-bets* (Becker, 1960). The individual incurs a choice cost when binding his or her interests to a process or activity from which it is difficult to break away from it in the medium term by means of a *side-bet* (Becker, 1960), in our case the decision to leave the organization.

H2: There is a negative and significant relation between continuance commitment and the intention to leave the organization.

With respect to the hypothetical relations between subjective success and commitment, if we consider it from the classical perspective of a relational psychological contract, the relation between subjective success and organizational commitment, following a model based on strong commitment and a high level of trust between the sides, it would be expected to be positive and significant for both components of organizational commitment. But, as explained earlier, in Western countries a paradigm shift is taking place towards psychological contracts of a transactional nature (Rousseau, 1989; Rousseau and Wade-Benzoni, 1995). Against this background, as with traditional career profiles, it is hoped that a positive relation between subjective success and affective commitment exists. That is to say, with reference to transactional psychological contracts, which entail limited implication from both sides and that tend to concentrate more on direct and immediate gains (Rousseau, 1989; Rousseau and Wade-Benzoni, 1995), it is expected that together with individuals' higher subjective success with their professional careers, opportunities that the organization has offered and offers will be perceived as possible precedents for this satisfaction, and they will therefore feel more emotionally tied to the organization.

H3: There is a positive and significant relation between subjective success and affective commitment.

On the other hand, with reference to the relation between subjective success and continuance commitment, in a classic career model we should expect a positive relation. That is to say, with a greater perception of objective and subjective professional success, the individual would perceive an increase in the cost of an opportunity to leave the organization, associated to greater mutual trust and a linear long-term career perspective in the same organization. But within the paradigm shift towards transactional psychological contracts, linked to a constant change in environment, it is expected that individuals are less dependent on organizations and therefore, a high subjective satisfaction with their career provides a greater focus on promotion, a reduced fear of failure directing themselves towards desired objectives, greater self-confidence and therefore a smaller *side-bet* perception. So, the relation between subjective success and continuance commitment is expected to be negative.

H4: There is a negative and significant relation between subjective success and continuance commitment.

To sum up, in the present context, subjective success should show a positive relation to affective commitment and a negative relation to continuance commitment. In addition, indirectly, this would confirm a paradigm change in professional careers, a fact that would presently affect certain human resources policies, mainly those that would only be valid in a relational psychological contract environment.

3. Sample and measurements

In order to collect the necessary data to undertake the study, a sample of 434 Spanish professionals was selected. The respondents were completing diverse distance university and postgraduate courses, and they participated in survey via Internet. 150 valid answers were obtained $N = 150$, which represents 34.56% of the questionnaires sent out. 42% of participants were men. The average age of participants was 30.95 years ($SD=7.40$), with an average work experience of 9.91 years ($SD = 6.86$) and an average organizational tenure of 5.24 years ($SD=5.44$). 44.00% of the informants worked for small companies, 13% for medium-sized companies and, finally, 42.67% were employees of large companies.

With reference to academic background, the majority of the respondents (54.67%) had baccalaureate, 40% had diplomas in technical engineering or honours degrees in engineering, and 5.33% were PhD. They represented diverse sectors (2% agriculture, 26% industry, manufacturing and distribution, 9% construction and 63% services).

Subjective success was measured using the scale developed by Greenhaus *et al.* (1990) (*"I am satisfied with the progress that I have made in the sense of reaching my professional goals"*), obtaining a Cronbach alpha of 0.88, comparable previous investigations have reported Cronbach alphas of 0.88 (Greenhaus *et al.*, 1990). The components of organizational commitment were evaluated using the scales of affective commitment and continuance commitment used by Gellatly, Meyer and Luchak (2006), and Frutos, Ruiz and San Martin (1998) (*"Working in this organization means a lot to me"*, *"If I now decide to leave this organization many things in my personal life would be interrupted"*). The Cronbach alphas for each of these scales turned out to be 0.87 and 0.79 respectively, which shows a high internal consistency (Nunnally and Bernstein, 1994) and are comparatively favourable to the results of previous investigations (Meyer *et al.*, 2002). The intention to leave was evaluated with a scale of three items that reflect a strong relation with the employee rotation (Griffeth *et al.*, 2000; Mobley, 1977; Sager *et al.*, 1998) adapted from Luchak and Gellatly (2007) (*"During the last year, I have thought about looking for another job"*), obtaining a Cronbach alpha of 0.93. All the items were evaluated using a Likert scale of five points (1 = Totally disagree, 5 = Totally agree).

4. Results and discussion

Having examined the reliability and validity of the scales used, a Pearson correlation analysis was undertaken between each pair of constructs to verify that the relations were in accordance with the theoretical findings in the literature. We observe that all the correlations are significant and in a suitable direction, in this way demonstrating the nomologic validity (Hair, Black, Babin, Anderson and Tatham, 1998). Table 1 shows the means, standard deviations and correlations between the constructs used in this study.

Table 1: Means, standard deviations and correlations

Variables	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4
1. Professional success	17.38	3.58				
2. Affective commitment	9.17	2.95	.21*			
3. Continuance commitment	7.42	2.43	-.25**	.16*		
4. Intention to leave	7.97	3.91	-.21**	-.30**	-.26**	

** $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$

The hypotheses considered have been contrasted by means of a model of structural equations (see Figure 2). The proposed model is well in line with the data: $\lambda^2 = 129.200$, $gl = 73$, $p = .000$; $CFI = .953$; $IFI = .954$; $NFI = .900$; $RMSEA = .072$. For the indices IFC, IFI and NFI values equal or superiors to 0.90 are considered acceptable (Hair *et al.*, 1998). The values of RMSEA go from 1 to 0, where the values closest to 0 indicate a better fit. A priori we consider that the fit is acceptable if RMSEA is smaller or equal to 0.08, and it is good if RMSEA is smaller or equal to 0.05. Nevertheless, these cut-off points are arbitrary and have been indicated by some authors that what is considered acceptable depends on the level of adjustment reached by previous models of the same phenomenon (Kline, 1998).

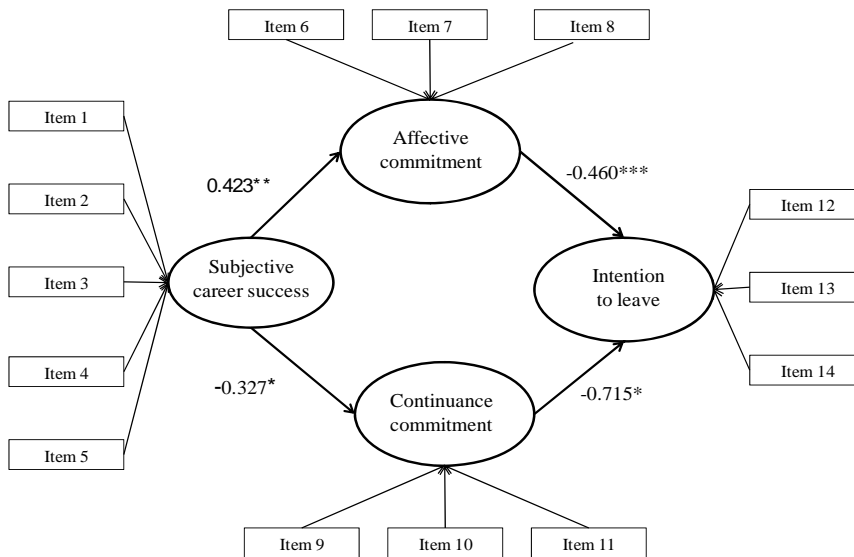


Figure 1: Model of structural equations

As far as specific relations in the hypotheses are concerned, we notice that individual perception of the professional success reached is positively related to affective commitment and negatively to continuance commitment. Both commitment components have a negative relation with the intention to leave the organization, more significant in this case than affective commitment, which is in line with the

existing literature (Meyer *et al.*, 2002). In this way, all the hypotheses presented have been confirmed.

First of all, we notice a negative relation between affective commitment and the intention to leave the organization. As we observed in the results, this component of organizational commitment tends to display a stronger and more significant relation to any *outcome* identified in the literature, including the focal behaviours (*e.g.* the intention to leave the organization) and discretionary behaviours (*e.g.* work performance and organizational citizenship), than continuance (Stanley *et al.*, 1999). This fact has been justified by suggesting that the binding strengths are not equal for all mindsets associated to commitment (Meyer *et al.*, 2004). In this way, the strength will be greater when desire is experienced, than when commitment is accompanied by mindsets such as perceived cost or obligation. Therefore, in spite of also displaying a negative relation for the continuance component, it is confirmed that this relation is less intense.

The acceptance of the third hypothesis confirms that individuals with high subjective success are more inclined to establish affective bonds with their colleagues and show greater involvement and identification with the organization. Then, regardless of a gradual change in the profile of professional careers and the associated psychological contract, where the binding strengths between individual and organization have been toned down, stimulating certain structural variables can ensure maintaining high levels of affective commitment between members of the organization.

Finally (hypothesis four) those employees with a high subjective satisfaction with their professional careers, are less committed to the organization in the continuance component, given its negative relation. That is to say, the greater subjective satisfaction is with the professional career, the lower continuance commitment is, results that could be indicating a paradigm shift in employees' psychological contracts. In spite of this, we must be cautious about generalizing the results and take into account the limitations of the sample, whose average age is relatively young (30.95 years) as well as their high education level. Therefore, with caution and dependent on future investigations with other sample characteristics, a certain tendency has been observed between young, well-qualified employees towards non-classic career profiles, which would increase their perception of autonomy. On the other hand, those that perceive subjective dissatisfaction with the progress made in their professional career could be undergoing greater personal frustration and, therefore, a lower perception of opportunities or alternatives outside their present organization.

5. Conclusions, future lines of investigation and practical implications

The purpose of this study has been to examine the relation between subjective success, the components of affective and continuance in organizational commitment, and the intention to leave the organization. In the current organizational context, characterized by major changes and widespread transformations within the framework of transitions made in relation to psychological contracts, and to the perception of

mutual expectations and obligations that are created in relation to labour exchange, we have argued that organizational commitment, and more specifically affective commitment, remains key in terms of talent retention, as well as in obtaining improved performance and desirable behaviour in an organization. Organizations should concentrate their efforts on increasing employees' subjective satisfaction in their professional career, concentrating on the factors that determine this satisfaction (e.g., progress, goals reached, pay, improvement in professional skills and competence). Offering positions with greater responsibility, delegating functions, giving recognition for work well done (Peluchette 1993), enriching work positions, proposing training directed at the increase and continuous improvement in competence and professional skills, as well as developing personal efficiency (Abele and Spurk, 2009), are only some of the activities that companies can undertake in order to increase the subjective professional success of their employees.

On the other hand, we have observed that having employees with high subjective professional success implies a smaller continuance commitment, but we believe that it increases even more the importance of realising human resources policies that stimulate subjective success. That is to say, from the organizational point of view it is more interesting to have employees with high affective commitment than with high continuance commitment. The desirable focal behaviours in organizations are significantly superior in individuals who are committed affectively (Meyer *et al.*, 2002). At the same time, discretionary behaviours (e.g., absenteeism, work performance, citizenship behaviour, altruism directed towards change) are also seen to be reinforced.

The literature suggests that individuals with high levels of continuance commitment perceive their choices as being more externally controlled, therefore displaying a strong external locus of control, and a strong orientation towards prevention. According to the theory on regulatory focus (Higgins, 1998), individuals with a high focus on prevention will display a higher level of vigilance to ensure safety and to avoid losses. Subsequently, continuance commitment, when prompted by a motivational framework in which orientation towards prevention predominates, leads us to fulfil only the minimum work requirements, unlike that associated with an affective commitment motivational framework, in which an orientation towards promotion predominates, prompting individuals to act at maximum performance levels. In other words, the fact that the current changes could mean that employees display generally lower continuance commitment, should not suppose a threat to organizations, but rather quite the opposite. Only those employees with high levels of continuance commitment will be motivated to realise anything not explicitly required or expected of them, for which reason it is necessary to review all those human resources policies centered solely on retaining talent through the perception of *side-bet* and, consequently, continuance commitment.

As already discussed, one of the limitations of this study is the fact that the sample group was made up of professionals who were also studying, therefore a relatively homogenous sample in terms of age and education. Consequently, the generalization

of the results must adapt to these clarifications. Future investigations should include more heterogeneous sample groups, and at the same time to analyze the possibility of the coexistence of different professional career profiles and of associated psychological contracts, by means of cluster analysis.

On the other hand and in relation to data collected, it is necessary to emphasize that the questionnaires were completed at a pre-crisis stage (May 2008) and that during the current international crisis, global average values for continuance commitment could be significantly different. In this sense, we believe that longitudinal studies should be considered to compare the results of this research with others undertaken in different contexts, and we wonder if the results obtained and the significance of the relations could be affected, or how it could influence the perception of employees' subjective success. Without doubt, longitudinal studies could offer a greater understanding of this study's findings, replacing causality relations between the constructs that constitute the object of this study.

Also, the model should be extending by analyzing other discretionary behaviours, such as organizational citizenship, altruism to change and innovation, counter-productive behaviour, absenteeism or psychological stress, and going more in depth with complex models to include other measures of satisfaction such as work satisfaction. Along a similar line and to better observe the possible paradigm change in psychological contracts, we believe it would be interesting to include measures of objective success and to compare them with subjective success, in relation to organizational commitment and its *outcomes*. Finally, in relation to organizational commitment, measures of normative commitment should be included that can be clearly differentiated from affective commitment, and to see if subjective success can generate normative pressures in those individuals that have behavioural implications.

Research results reveal that the attitudes and the behaviors analyzed in this study do not differ between employees working in the public and in the private sector, respectively. These results are consistent with previous research conducted on organizational commitment and different behaviors typically examined (Bayona *et al.*, 2000). Nevertheless, various studies conducted in Spain in the public sector (Bayona *et al.*, 2000) show differences in the commitment level between public sector employees with indefinite and fixed duration contracts, respectively.

In that sense, we believe that, given the results obtained in previous studies (Bayona *et al.*, 2000; Simo *et al.*, 2008), future research should continue exploring in depth the differences between the different types of contracts in public administration, segmenting the sample into tenured and tenured-track individuals (employees employed on an indefinite vs. fixed term contract). Once confirmed significant differences between the two groups, specific human resource policies should be developed, in order to reduce counterproductive behaviors in public administration and encourage desirable behaviors, and thus, adding more complexity to management.

In order to summarize and as a principal conclusion, if, as suggested in the literature, individuals perceive organizations as mere vehicles for their professional careers,

and on the other hand organizations cannot guarantee job security in the long term, the possibility of employees affectively committing themselves requires the adoption of new human resources policies. The policies should stimulate the psychological success of their professional careers, taking into account that this could diminish their continuance commitment, and contrary to this possible reduction will be a compensation through greater affective commitment and therefore a lower level in the intention to leave the organization, among other desirable behaviours.

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