THE MEANING OF COMMITMENT IN PROFESSIONAL SERVICE RELATIONSHIPS: ISSUES IN RELATING THEORY TO PRACTICE

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Introduction

This paper considers the meaning of commitment within the context of professional service firm exchange relationships. Several authors identify commitment as an important component of successful market relationships because it gives rise to co-operative behaviours (Dwyer, Schurr and Oh 1987; Morgan and Hunt 1994; Garbarino and Johnson 1999). A relationship that is characterised by co-operation between two parties is more likely to be long-term, participative and focused on achieving service quality than one that is not. In business to business relationships, such as those between a service provider and a client, commitment is evident by investment decisions that seek to establish and maintain long term, mutually beneficial relationships (Beaton and Beaton 1995).

However, despite extensive interest in commitment, mainly in the psychological and organisational behaviour literatures, there has been little empirical research into the meaning of commitment in relationships, the processes that underlie commitment and how they affect the relationship outcome. Much of the psychological literature looks at specific instances of commitment, such as between spouses, whilst the organisational behaviour literature mainly addresses the relationship of an employee to the organisation. Studies that address other 'foci of commitment' (entities to which one is committed), such as the commitment of customers to the organisation or of the commitment of employees to the customer, have tended to apply models borrowed from the organisational behaviour literature (e.g. Betterncourt 1997). However, several researchers have identified that there may be shortfalls in the way that commitment has been conceptualised (e.g. Randall 1990; Meyer and Allen 1997). This suggests the need to reassess the meaning of commitment.

Professional service organisations such as legal, consulting and accounting firms, represent an under-researched area in terms of exchange relationships (Beaton and Beaton 1995). This sector is chosen for considering the meaning of commitment as professionals' relationships with their clients are often characterised by being long-term, participative and dedicated to providing high levels of service to the client.

This paper is structured as follows: first, we discuss the theoretical literature that identifies the importance of commitment in successful relationships. Second, we provide a detailed review of the conceptualisation of commitment within the organisational behaviour literature. This comprises of the various components of commitment, with both the 'nature of commitment' (including the relative strength of three components: affective, continuance and normative commitment, Meyer and Allen 1991) and the 'focus of commitment' (the entity to which someone is psychologically committed, Becker and Billings 1993). Third, some key methodological limitations of commitment studies are highlighted, suggesting the need for new approaches to the research of commitment. Fourth, we consider the meaning of commitment within the context of the relationship between a professional and their client. We outline a study that is investigating the meaning of commitment used by lawyers and their clients in their professional relationships. Findings from the first stage of this study are reported and this suggests that the theoretical conceptualisation of commitment may not reflect the operational meaning of commitment within a professional relationship. Finally, we identify specific research directions that seek to clarify the role of commitment in successful supplier-client relationships.

THE IMPORTANCE OF COMMITMENT IN SUCCESSFUL RELATIONSHIPS

The growth in popularity of relationship marketing has been explained as a response to the changed market environment, including heightened competition, changing structure of markets and the increased sophistication of customers (Shapiro 1991, Webster 1993). Traditional marketing theory developed in US consumer markets was based on the concept of market exchange (Kotler 1984) and use of the marketing mix (Borden 1965). Increasingly this has been considered inappropriate, particularly in industrial, service and business to business markets.

One key aspect of relationship marketing is recognition of the importance of long term relationships. Authors of services marketing literature (e.g. Berry 1983) suggested that retaining customers is increasingly important due to the heightened competition between suppliers with essentially similar services. Within the Industrial Marketing and Purchasing (IMP) Group, researchers considered the importance of understanding the complexities of relationships within the business-to-business markets (e.g. Hakansson and Wootz 1979, Ford 1980). They stressed that maintaining relationships may be an important task for the seller and this could not be achieved simply by manipulating the marketing mix. This is a major change from previous marketing strategy in the industrial and consumer marketing literature, which focuses on the importance of the discrete purchase (Hakansson 1982).

Sheth and Parvatiyar (1995) observed that, to develop a comprehensive theory of relationship marketing, understanding is needed of why consumers choose to engage in relational behaviour with a supplier. They suggested that various influences are important motivators, including personal, social and institutional influences. The 'commitment-trust' theory of relationship marketing (Morgan and Hunt 1994) , offers an explanation of one motive for relational behaviour. It identifies that commitment is central to relational exchanges between the firm and its various stakeholders. Commitment and trust are regarded as essential because they lead directly to co-operative behaviours that are vital for long term, mutually beneficial relationships. They encourage co-operation between partners, emphasise long term rather than short term benefits of staying with existing relationships and give confidence that partners will not act opportunistically. Morgan and Hunt identified conditions that nurture commitment and trust and suggest that organisations need to focus on these if they wish to develop a co-operative network of market relationships. This contrasts with traditional marketing theory that suggests market relationships are characterised by the power or coerciveness of one partner over the other. Morgan and Hunt suggested that coercive power gives compliance between partners because they are compelled to do so, whilst partners committed to the relationship acquiesce because they want to do so.

Garbarino and Johnson (1999) offer a further refinement to the 'commitment-trust' theory. They suggest that commitment and trust are important in predicting future behaviour of high relational (loyal and consistent) customers, but satisfaction is a more important indicator for low relational (occasional and transactional) customers. Thus commitment and trust are likely to be important in relationships that are characterised by mainly high relational customers. This is the case in professional service relationships, where provision of the service often requires an in-depth knowledge of the client, which is acquired over repeated transactions. It is in this context that we explore the meaning of commitment.

THE NATURE OF COMMITMENT

There is a vast literature that considers the nature of commitment in the workplace. In particular, the organisational behaviour literature has extensively explored commitment of employees (e.g. Kanter 1968; Porter, Steers, Mowday and Boulian 1974; Meyer and Allen 1997). One important distinction that has been made, is between attitudinal and behavioural commitment. Mowday, Porter and Steers (1982) describe these as "*attitudinal commitment focuses on the processes by which people come to think about their relationship with the organisation … ..Behavioural commitment, on the other hand, relates to the process by which individuals' become locked into a certain organisation and how they deal with the problem*" (p26).

Meyer and Allen (1991) offer a further distinction, identifying three components of commitment: '*continuance*', *'normative'* and '*affective*' commitment. These they describe as 'have to', 'ought to' and 'want to'. Each component of commitment has different behavioural outcomes, though an individual may reflect varying degrees of all three components of commitment to a particular focus (Meyer and Allen 1997).

Continuance commitment involves *"profit associated with continued participation and a 'cost' associated with leaving* "(Kanter 1968, p 507). A key predictor of desire to stay or leave is commitment to the organisation (Wong, Hui and Law 1995). Normative commitment is "*the internalised normative pressure to act in a way which meets organisational goals and interests*" (Wiener, 1982, p 421). This has been studied extensively, especially in the "psychological contract" between an employer and employee (Levinson, Price, Munden, Mandl and Solley 1962; Schein 1965; Rousseau 1990). Affective commitment is described as "*the relative strength of an individual's identification with and involvement in a particular organisation"* (Mowday, Porter and Steers 1982, p27). This is probably the most beneficial component of commitment for an organisation to engender within its employees as it is associated with productive behaviour aimed at contributing meaningfully to the organisation (Meyer and Allen 1997). Behaviour associated with affective commitment includes those defined as organisational citizenship behaviour (Bateman and Organ 1983). These are behaviours that are *"discretionary, not directly or explicitly recognised by the formal reward system, and that in the aggregate promotes the effective functioning of the organisation* "(Organ 1988, p4) Those employees with strong affective commitment appear more willing to engage in organisational citizenship behaviour than those with weak affective commitment (Meyer and Allen 1986; Shore and Wayne 1993).

Another distinction that can be made is the '*focus of commitment'*. Foci of commitment are the individuals or groups to whom a person is attached (Reichers 1985). Within the organisational behaviour literature, much of the theoretical interest has been on commitment to the organisation. However, as Reichers (1985) pointed out, the organisation comprises of a number of components, each with its own goals and values; for example owners, the profession, managers, work groups and customers. Dual foci of commitment, when a person is attached to two different foci, is a unique construct and has different explanatory power beyond commitment to individual foci (Bremmels 1995, Becker and Billings 1993). This has important implications for the employee-customer relationship. For example, if the employee is committed to the organisation but not the customer then he/she may be bound by organisational rules (Organ and Ryan 1995), which may impact negatively on the service received by the customer. This is supported by Hartline and Ferrell (1993), who found that employee commitment to the organisation is negatively related to customer perceived service quality.

A number of models have been suggested to describe commitment in the workplace. For example, Randall and Cote (1991) proposed a five part model, comprising of Protestant work ethic, career salience, job involvement, work group attachment as well as organisational commitment. Morrow (1993) used similar constructs to Randall and Cote, but suggested that they are concentrically layered, to reflect the permeability of outside influences that could impact these component parts. For example, job involvement (the most vulnerable 'layer' to outside influences) could be temporarily negatively affected by a negative event at work, but the individual might continue to feel committed to staying with the organisation (the most impermeable 'layer'). Further research continues on work commitment. For example, recent empirical research by Cohen (1999) into work commitment of Canadian nurses, gives support to Randall and Cote's model, although more study is needed of how the elements are linked together.

Despite the huge volume of research addressing the commitment of employee to the organisation, there has been little attention to understanding commitment in employee-customer relationships. One stream of work that has potential in this regard is research connected with the 'service profit chain' (Heskett, Jones, Loveman, Sasser and Schlesinger 1994). This model links management practice, employee attitude, customer behaviour and business performance. Although commitment behaviour is not identified specifically in the model, Heskett et al suggest that employee productivity and employee retention can have an important impact on external service value, which is linked to customer satisfaction and customer retention. Heskett suggests that productivity is important as this reduces costs, increasing the value perceived by customers. Retained employees know their jobs and their customers and so are able to provide higher quality customer service and greater value. Likewise, retained, satisfied customers provide positive feedback to employees, which also creates greater employee satisfaction. Both productivity and retention are behaviours associated with commitment.

There is only limited empirical evidence that supports the entire service profit chain (e.g. Loveman 1998). However, specific links of the chain have been extensively researched. For example Angle and Perry (19981) found that commitment to the organisation was associated with positive, productive behaviour (such as reduced tardiness and absenteeism of employees), and this enhanced organisational effectiveness. Mowday et al (1974) suggested that employees' organisational commitment was related to customer ratings of service. Ostroff's (1992) study of organisational commitment in schools, indicated that teacher commitment was related to several measures of student satisfaction with the quality of the teachers and the education received. Also Barber, Hayday and Bevan (1999) identified that employee commitment was a key behaviour that links employee satisfaction and customer satisfaction.

LIMITATIONS OF RESEARCH INTO COMMITMENT

However, research into commitment is fraught with problems. A weakness of many empirical studies, is they fail to distinguish between the three components and the various foci of commitment. Most studies have used the Organisational Commitment Questionnaire (OCQ) (Mowday, Steers and Porter 1979) which is a multi-dimensional instrument and gives an overall measure of organisational commitment. The OCQ was adapted by Cook and Wall (1980) for use in Britain, but both instruments have been criticised as they fail to capture the full conceptualisation of commitment (e.g.Brown 1996, Randall 1990). Similarly, Morgan and Hunt (1994) developed an instrument to examine commitment to an interorganisational relationship. However, again they adapted Mowday et al. (1979) and Meyer and Allen (1984) to fit with their definition of relationship commitment, so the same problems arise. The focus of the instrument is on continuance commitment whilst other components of commitment are neglected. Also there are concerns about the conceptualisation of commitment, with criticism of whether sub-concepts are components of a whole, and if separate components should be aggregated (Benkhoff 1997).

Meyer and Allen (1997) acknowledge that an employee's relationship with an organisation may reflect varying degrees of all three commitment components, but it is important that the strength of each should be individually considered as the associated behaviours are profoundly different. However few studies make this distinction. For example, Becker, Billings, Eveleth and Gilbert (1996) surveyed research linking employee commitment and job performance. They noted that earlier studies had not distinguished between individual foci and motives of commitment and therefore provided inconclusive evidence of a linkage. In contrast, their study identified different foci of commitment within the organisation and found that commitment to supervisors was positively related to performance whilst commitment to the organisation overall had only a weak correlation. Therefore, some authors have suggest that it is useful to identify a profile of an employee's commitment (Allen and Meyer 1990; Becker 1992; Reichers 1985). This distinguishes individual foci that are important for an individual and identifies the strength of the three components of commitment associated with each one.

Despite the potential theoretical and applied importance of commitment profiles, there have been few studies that have either developed a profile of commitment or empirically examined the usefulness of such profiles. One exception (Becker and Billings 1993) distinguished amongst foci and bases (motives) of commitment and developed four profiles of commitment. The "*locally committed'* (employees who are attached to their supervisor and work group); the '*globally committed'* (who are attached to top management and the organisation) the '*committed*' (who are attached to top management and the organisation); and the *'uncommitted'* (who are attached to neither local nor global foci). These were used to predict behaviours such as intention to leave the organisation, job satisfaction and pro-social organisational behaviours. The authors conclude that "*commitment profiles should be considered as part of the explanation of commitment-related phenomena*" (Becker and Billings, 1993 p 188).

In the professional services literature, there have been some studies that distinguished between various foci. For example, Gouldner (1957 p 290) distinguished between "*cosmopolitan*" and "*local*" using three variables: reference group orientations, loyalty to an organisation and commitment to specialised or professional skills. Cosmopolitans were defined as *"low on loyalty to the employing organisation, high on commitment to specialised* *role skills and likely to use an outer reference group orientation"* (i.e. to their professional body). Whilst locals are "*high on loyalty to the employing organisation, low on commitment to specialised role skills and likely to use an inner reference group orientation"* (i.e. to their employing organisation).

A further limitation of research into commitment is that most studies adopt survey methods that do not explore an individual's meaning of commitment. Surveys are largely based on the OCQ and do not necessarily reflect an individual's meaning of commitment. Reichers (1985 p 469) suggests that an individual's own perceptions and definition of commitment have been neglected and that measurement scales that are commonly used may not reflect the way people experience commitment.

Similarly Randall, Fedor and Longeneceker (1990) suggest that research is needed to explore the expression of commitment. They used qualitative interviews to understand the conceptualisation of commitment by subjects. In this work, they derived 15 item which are shown in Table 1. Apart from continuance commitment, identified as 'presence', they identified a concern for quality, the willingness to sacrifice personal concerns for the organisation and willingness to share information. These important features of commitment in the workplace would be lost if measured by the popular OCQ instrument, which focuses on continuance commitment. This suggests that additional approaches are needed in investigating the meaning of commitment to individuals.

Table 1 Randall, Fedor & Longenecker (1990) Commitment Behaviours

Item Content	**Factor Label**
Usually paying attention to details at work	Quality
Doing your work completely and thoroughly	Quality
Having a concern for quality	Quality
Being cost-conscious	Quality
Typically following company policy	Quality
Being willing to volunteer for tasks	Sacrifice
Being willing to take on additional responsibly	Sacrifice
Being willing to give personal time to the organisation	Sacrifice
Working well without supervision	Sacrifice
Often sharing knowledge and information with others	Sharing
Frequently offering suggestions	Sharing
Not being late for work	Presence
Not being absent from work	Presence
Not wasting any time	No label – dropped
Showing enthusiasm about your work	No label - dropped

Source: Randall, Fedor & Longenecker (1990)

Some researchers have suggested the importance of studying commitment behaviour by what an individual does rather than relying on an individual to report on their behaviour in a survey questionnaire (Luthans, Baack and Taylor 1987). For example, Peccei and Rosenthal (1997) have developed an instrument measuring commitment to customer service, which they link to individual performance. They defined commitment to customer service as the extent to which individuals "*engage in continuous improvement on the job for the benefit of customers and to exert effort on the job on behalf of customers*." They tested a model that sets out the antecedents of commitment to customer service and found that willingness and capacity to be able to perform customer service were strong predictors of commitment.

Likewise, Benkhoff (1997) recognised the difficulty of identifying the variety of behaviour that might be termed 'commitment'. Like Luthans et al. (1987), she suggested that commitment should be explored by measuring what an individual does. To meet her criteria for inclusion, 'commitment behaviour' should exceed the normal requirements of the job and should not be specifically controlled or rewarded. Using qualitative interviews and focus groups, she established a list of 'commitment behaviours' that included accepting extra responsibilities, working hard, taking the initiative and acceptance of organisational policies. These are listed in Table 2.

Table 2 Benkhoff (1997) Commitment Behaviours

1. I always try to contribute to the performance of the bank by suggesting improvements to my boss and my colleagues.
2. Even if I do not like particular organisational changes, I comply with those policies if they contribute to the continuous prosperity of the bank.
3. I am always friendly and helpful to customers, even if I do not like them particularly.
4. I avoid taking on additional duties and responsibilities at work.
5. Basically I am an employee like everybody else. What counts is not getting under stress so that I do not get overworked.
6. I put myself out in my work and I often do more than is demanded of me. My job is so important to me that I sacrifice much for it.

Source: Benkhoff (1997)

This illustrates that commitment may be used to include a number of behaviours that have not previously been explored by the OCQ, which is focused mainly on loyalty and desire to stay. In particular characteristics of contribution, personal sacrifice and making an appropriate impression on others are identified.

Two further considerations have been largely overlooked in commitment studies. First, the '*cycle of commitment'* (Anderson, Ross and Weitz 1996), suggests that each channel member's level of commitment is influenced by perceptions of the commitment of others. These researchers found that mutual commitment can be built by a process of signalling and reciprocity, whilst one sided commitment is difficult to create. They identified that commitment by one party enhances performance outcomes perceived by the other party, whether or not either party is aware of true levels of commitment by the other party. Second, there is a likely *'Pygmalion'* effect (Eden 1990; Livingston 1969). This term has been adopted in the management literature to represent the act of transforming someone from one state to another. For example, a manager or a customer who has a high expectation of an employee, may positively influence employee performance. Shore, Barksdale and Shore (1995) found that perceived levels of employee commitment impact on managerial judgement and treatment of employees. Likewise Schneider, White and Paul (1998) suggests that the boundary between employee and customer should be seen as a two way flow and highly permeable.

THE MEANING OF COMMITMENT IN PROFESSIONAL RELATIONSHIPS

There are many definitions of "meaning" and these tend to correspond with the context in which it is used and the techniques that are employed. For example, a sociologist or anthropologist typically defines the meaning of a sign in terms of the common features of the usage situation and of the activities that it produces (Osgood, Suci and Tannenbaum 1975 p2). From a cognitivist perspective, meaning can be considered by identifying the cognitive structures and processes that are used. However, sense making is also related to the social context. Therefore, social psychologists view reality as an interaction between action, actor and observer (Fiske and Taylor 1984).

The meaning of commitment in professional relationships is of particular interest for a number of reasons. First, professionals' relationships with their clients are often long-term, participative and dedicated to providing good service to the client; these are key features identified as important in relationship marketing and so provide a suitable context for examining committed relationships.

Second, in professional services, the service delivered is often intangible and highly complex. Gronroos (1985) distinguished between technical and functional quality. The skills and knowledge of the professional determine the former, whilst the relationship with the professional, how the service is delivered and the service environment form part of the functional quality. Often, the client has difficulty in determining the 'technical' quality of the service provided. Therefore 'functional quality', including the behaviour of professionals, is used to help asses client perceptions of value (Levitt 1981; Freeman and Dart 1993). So the commitment behaviour of a professional may be important in determining a client's perception of value.

Third, there are characteristics of professionals and their organisations that are particularly relevant to examining commitment. An early definition of "professionalism" – the extent to which one is committed to one's profession, identified elements including dedication and social obligation (Hall 1968). A professional tends to be highly committed to performing an excellent job for clients (Nelson 1988). Also, in some professions, such as law firms, organisations are structured into partnerships. This means that equity partners make a financial investment in the firm and are therefore likely to be highly committed to the organisation and to developing successful relationships with clients. Thus professional partnerships are particularly suited to studying commitment behaviour.

However, what is meant by 'commitment' in a professional relationship? Apart from individuals using different meanings of commitment, Benkhoff 1997) suggests that the behaviours associated with commitment, may vary between organisations. Behaviour considered as part of the job in one organisation, might be regarded as commitment behaviour in another.

Although there has been relatively little research into professional relationships with their clients, there have been some studies that have focused on the relationships of the professional internally within the organisation and externally with the profession. In particular, there has been considerable interest in studying the conflict of commitment between these two roles. Traditionally, the literature assumes that there may be conflict between professional and organisational loyalties (Ben-David 1958; Blau and Scott 1962). However, other studies suggest that professional employees can be committed to both the profession and the organisation (e.g. Lachman and Aranya 1986). Wallace (1995) provides empirical evidence that professionals in general and lawyers in particular, do not necessarily experience conflict between professional and organisational commitment.

The meaning of commitment between lawyers and their clients

This paper reports on the first stage of a study that seeks to develop a methodology for examining the meaning of commitment. It explores the meaning of commitment in professional relationships within the context of dyadic relationships between partners of a large, city law firm and their clients. The first stage, examines *individual partner's views of commitment*, and this is explored within the context of one major client transaction. The second stage will consider *individual client's meaning of commitment* within the same transactions. Using findings from these two stages, in the third stage the methodology will be tested across a wider sample and the meaning of commitment will be explored in greater detail.

Methodology

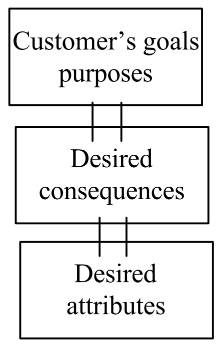
The organisation chosen for this study is a successful City law firm, comprising of seventy equity partners and over five hundred other staff. The firm is well known and is one of the leading specialist practices in the UK with clients including major institutional, government and blue chip organisations. The partnership operates a 'lock step' compensation system, where partner compensation is set by a formula based on seniority.

The research reported in this paper focused on a major department within the firm, comprising of twenty six partners and over eighty fee earners. Six dyadic relationships were selected and for each, one significant, recent transaction was identified. Relationships were classified into either 'successful' or 'room for improvement'. 'Successful relationships' were those where there has been a growth in fees each year for three consecutive years. Those classified as 'room for improvement', were those where fees have declined or remained approximately static over the last three years. After an initial review of possible relationships for selection, the list was further refined based on the views of an internal consultant, who is familiar with each of the relationships and yet is objective to them.

Qualitative in-depth interviews were used to explore the meaning of commitment for each of six selected partners. Using a social psychological perspective, partners were asked to think about a person in a work context who they considered as committed and one who was less committed. They were then asked to describe why they had chosen these individuals and how they would describe their behaviours. Answering open ended questions and responding to prompts, interviewees identified constructs they would use to describe commitment behaviour. The interviewer noted these, and the interviewee was asked to explain fully the meaning of each construct and describe situations in which these commitment behaviours might occur. Interviewees then identified a ranking of importance for the identified constructs, in their meaning of commitment.

Then, adopting a cognitivist perspective, the interviewer started an in-depth probing of the meaning of constructs, using a laddering technique (Reynolds and Gutman 1984, 1988). This laddering approach has mainly been used in the field of consumer behaviour, where researchers have tried to understand buyer behaviour through personal values. It is associated with the means end chain (Gutman 1982), which is a simple knowledge structure, where by personal values (the ends) are linked to product features (the means). Choice of product is guided by the desired end state, which is associated with specific consequences and this is made simpler by grouping product attributes. This framework is shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1: The Customer value hierarchy model



Source: Adapted from Woodruff and Gardial (1997 p142)

Although the customer value hierarchy model has mainly been used in understanding cognitive structures in consumer choice situations (Reynolds, Gutman and Fiedler 1984) some authors have suggested that it can be used in a number of other situations where the desire is to reveal the underlying cognitive structures. See, for example, Jolly, Reynolds and Slocum (1988) who explored cognitive structures used in performance appraisal and Mentzer, Rutner and Matsuno (1997) who examined customer value in logistics situations. This approach was used in the current research, as it was considered helpful in revealing the underlying cognitive structures used to describe commitment by professionals, giving additional clarity to the respondents meaning of commitment.

The interviewer introduced the most important construct previously mentioned by the interviewee. The interviewee was asked to describe why it was important to their definition of commitment. Then, using this response, the interviewer again asked why this was important to the interviewee and their meaning of commitment. The interview continued with each construct fully explored, revealing a chain of importance at each level of attribute, consequence and end goal. For some constructs, several consequences and end goals were mentioned. Many of the constructs had similar consequences and end goals. Generally, interviewees mentioned several attributes and consequences, but few end goals.

The remainder of the interview focused on exploring the interviewee's evaluation of the relationship and, in particular, the specific selected transaction. Interviews lasted between 90 to 120 minutes and so a large amount of data was gathered from each respondent.

The interviews were analysed in two ways. First, QSR NUD.IST was used to reveal patterns in the data. Second, the data was analysed by identifying the means-end chains of meaning for individual respondents.

The analysis using QSR NUD.IST involved coding and categorising the data, with systematic searches to find common usage of the meaning of commitment amongst respondents. First data was coded using Mowday et al's (1982) three sub-concepts of commitment of (continuance commitment, and affective commitment broken down into components of effort and identification) and those of Meyer and Allen (1991) (continuance, normative and affective commitment). It was evident from this initial coding that respondents frequently mentioned concepts that did not fit these theoretical constructs. These concepts were examined and three further categories were developed. These are listed below in Table 3.

Table 3: The meaning of commitment used by partners in a law firm

Item content	Category label
Work hard because paid to do a service	Continuance commitment – loyalty
Work hard because it is the duty of a professional	Normative commitment – duty
Going beyond what is expected by the client	Affective commitment – willingness to do the job
Dedication to seeing a promise carried through	Affective commitment – keeping promises
Personal gain including achieving ambition and wealth	Personal commitment – achieving personal goals
Personal satisfaction through delivering own specified service levels	Personal commitment – technical excellence
Manage relationship so that other party feels good which enhances own position	Impression management – make other party feel important
Creating an image that you are working hard and that you are highly motivated	Impression management – self enhancement
Appear to meet other parties requirements in order that relationship is retained	Impression management – protecting own position
Mutual sharing and responding to signs of commitment from the other party.	Partnership commitment

The most frequently mentioned concept was of managing the impression of being committed, so that the client believed in the partner's commitment. '*Impression management* ' included three sub-components. The first is of making the other party feel important. This was described by one partner as *"Most clients want to feel important…. You have to make them feel that they are the only client. I have come across the reaction, 'I don't care who else you act for, I'm not interested in that, you act for me and I expect my stuff to come first".*

The second sub-component of impression management was enhancing one's own self image in the eyes of other people. For example, one partner mentioned: *"It is perfectly obvious to me that if you don't start a meeting till 6.00 in the evening, it is going to go through the night. Why don't you start at 9.00 a.m. in the morning. It's because people want to appear very committed".*

The third sub-component of impression management was protecting one's own position by appearing committed. One partner suggested that this involved: "*….you have to massage the client, you have to make them think that you are on top of every piece of their work, you haven't got 200 odd files in the filing cabinet behind you. You have to give them a good impression*."

The second concept that did not fit previous theoretical definitions of commitment was termed '*personal commitment'*. This included two sub components. The first was technical excellence and defining quality according to ones own criteria. This was described as: *"I think that commitment is wanting every bit of work to be the best possible piece of work that you have ever put out."*

The second sub component of personal commitment was achieving personal goals and self satisfaction. For example, one partner mentioned: "*There is an intense satisfaction in achieving success for the client. I like going to meetings acting for x; people take you seriously which makes me feel great."*

The last additional concept that was identified was termed '*partnership commitment'*. Several respondents stressed that commitment was a mutual sharing within a relationship and that it was important to perceive the signals of the commitment from the other party. "*Commitment is something that is mutually shared. It is very difficult to commit unless it comes back and you feel that they are also committed to the relationship*."

It is clear from this analysis, that the theoretical meaning of commitment, for example Mowday et al (1979) and Cook and Wall (1980), which emphasise continuance commitment, has little relevance to the meaning given by respondents. Although the affective and normative commitment (Meyer and Allen 1991) are important, the nature of commitment seems to be more complex. There are similarities between these findings and Randall et al (1990) and Benkhoff (1997) who identified sharing and quality as important factors within commitment. However, the findings extended earlier work and refined concepts.

The second analysis, using the means end chain theoretical framework, aimed at revealing the underlying reasons as to *why* attributes of commitment are important to respondents. This added depth to the definitions given by respondents and revealed the motivation behind commitment. Repeatedly respondents raised issues that differed from previous theoretical meanings of commitment.

The means-end chain analysis is useful as it suggests that although affective commitment is relevant, respondents often wished to give the impression of being motivated and have a personal motivation for showing commitment. For example, they work hard, not because of identifying with the client but for personal satisfaction and a desire to increase their personal wealth. Also, they wish to 'impress' their clients and their colleagues about their commitment, rather than putting effort into their work because of an affective commitment to their clients. Often work that could be done by junior lawyers is kept by partners so that they can appear busy. Further, respondents mentioned that commitment concerns a "*sharing between exchange partners*" and a *"mutual respect".* For example, partners acknowledge that some transactions are unprofitable for them, but they are happy to do these as they know that others will be more financially beneficial for them. Also partners acknowledge that they can learn from clients and that they can only offer one professional view of a problem.

Some examples of respondents attributes, consequences and end goals are illustrated in Table 4.

Table 4: Attributes, consequences and end goals of the meaning of commitment used by partners in a city law firm

Respondent	Attributes	Consequences	End goals/values
No. 1	Work long hours. Push people to ensure work is done properly. Mutual sharing with client.	Get the work done. Don't loose the client. Builds trust.	Success of the business. Enhance personal reputation. Personal confidence in my ability.
No. 2	Do what is in the best interest of the client. Performing well for the client. Give people the best that you can Put myself out.	Client is loyal to you. Builds the business. Client is committed to you. Help them achieve their goals.	Achieve personal success. Personal satisfaction of seeing the business grow. Personal pride in achieving success for well known client. Personal enjoyment.
No. 3	Availability to do the job when required. Flexibility. Do what is necessary to get the job done. Do what people ask and when they ask it.	Give the impression that you are positive. Make people feel that you are interested in them and trying to achieve their goals.	Give a good role model for others to follow. Ensure that the relationship is retained. Make client committed to the relationship.
No. 4	Working long hours. Personal sacrifice. Get the job done, what ever the personal cost.	Differentiates me from others. Allows me to control the relationship.	Keeping the client. Personal reputation. Personal satisfaction in achieving success.
No. 5	Saying yes to requests. Being visible to the client and to the firm. Make client feel important. Put clients before own life. Being seen to work hard.	Makes client believe I am deeply committed to them. Solve problems. Gain respect of others. Solve others problems.	Personal desire to make money. Personal satisfaction of having done a good job for others.
No. 6	Fulfilling client expectations. Mutual sharing. Give the impression to the client that they come first amongst clients.	Client gives positive feedback. Mutual trust. Makes client feel special. Client wants to continue relationship	Personal satisfaction. Personal financial rewards. Confidence in my ability. Personal pride.

In this first stage of the study, the sample was considered too small to do further means-end chain analysis as suggested by Reynolds and Gutman (1988). However, in stage 2 and 3 hierarchical maps will be drawn of the means end chain of respondents and dominant causal chains will be identified. Also the hierarchical means end chains of partners and clients will be compared to see similarities and differences between them.

CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS FOR RESEARCH

This paper has considered the meaning of commitment within the context of professional service firm exchanges. It has highlighted that there may be shortfalls in the way that commitment has been conceptualised, and it suggests there is a need to reassess the meaning of commitment in market exchange relationships. The preliminary findings from a three stage study are discussed and reveal that the theoretical meaning of commitment has limitations within the context of professional relationships. In particular three additional attributes of commitment are identified, impressing others, personal gain and mutual sharing, which are not mentioned in the commitment literature. Further stages in the study will clarify the relevance of these concepts to the meaning of commitment shared between two parties within dyadic relationships. Additional research will then be required to test out these findings in other relationships and in other industry sectors.

There are a number of specific areas of research that would be particularly helpful to clarify the meaning of commitment within dyadic relationships. First, longitudinal studies would be useful to examine commitment at different stages in relationship development. Several writers have suggested that this is likely to vary within the duration of the client relationship (Rusbult 1983, Wilson and Mummalaneni 1986). For example, early in a relationship, each encounter with the service provider offers an opportunity to assess the commitment within the context of the relationship. Later, bonding may follow, with intensified commitment to each other. A third stage may involve comparing alternatives (Thibaut and Kelley 1959) and this may have a profound affect on commitment.

Second, research into commitment should consider national differences, as meaning is likely to differ between national cultures. The original OCQ was developed in the US and was then adapted to the UK by Cook and Wall (1980). This identified significant differences between the two cultures suggesting the importance of the cultural context of commitment. For example, in one culture a behaviour may be considered part of a job whilst in others it may be categorised as behaviour associated with commitment.

Third, although qualitative methods are suitable for identifying underlying constructs, quantitative studies would be useful for surveying the robustness of constructs across a wider sample. Critically, it is important that new instruments are developed to assess commitment, and these should more accurately reflect the meaning of commitment used in practice.

Research into understanding the meaning of commitment used by individuals is important for a number of reasons. First, if commitment is associated with successful relationships, it is useful to identify behaviour that manifests commitment. These behaviours can then be encouraged and rewarded. Second, problems with existing measurement instruments are outlined above and so there is a need for new approaches. Underlying constructs need to be clearly identified in order to develop ways of more accurately measuring commitment. Third, different meanings of commitment held by service providers (professionals) and their customers (clients), may impact on relationship outcomes. For example if a professional holds one meaning of commitment and manifests these behaviours, whilst a client uses another meaning, their lack of shared understanding may cause a problem in their relationship.

We suggest that as commitment has been identified as an important component of successful market relationships, it is critical that there is clarity about what is meant by commitment. This paper has indicated that there is an urgent need for additional research to explore the meaning of this concept within the context of exchange relationships.

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