RESEARCH NOTE

Abstract

A critical issue for any organization is how to select and preserve a committed and loyal workforce. Indeed, employee commitment and loyalty have significant implications for insider threat and personnel security. While organizations are faced with an unprecedented shift in the generational composition of the 21st Century workforce, research shows that generational differences do not appear to be a primary factor in loyalty and commitment. Instead, our research identified other factors that contribute to employees' ongoing commitment and provide strategies to improve important organizational attributes across career stages. The Threat Lab designed a Guidebook and Employee Career Stage Cards to help managers increase organizational commitment and loyalty in the workforce, which are described in this Research Note.

the ThreatLab
Integrating Research Into Practice

About The Threat Lab

PERSEREC founded The Threat Lab in 2018 to realize the Department of Defense (DoD) Counter-Insider Threat Program Director's vision to incorporate the social and behavioral sciences into the mission space. Our team is headquartered in Seaside, California, and includes psychologists, sociologists, policy analysts, computer scientists, and other subject matter experts committed to workforce protection.

Increasing Workforce Commitment and Loyalty in the 21st Century

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Introduction

Loyalty and commitment are highly desirable attributes in any organization and are especially important for DoD personnel who occupy sensitive positions. In addition, loyal and committed employees are less likely to become insider threats. The Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Intelligence & Security asked The Threat Lab, a program within the Defense Personnel and Security Research Center, to look at whether differences in generational cohorts (e.g., baby boomer, Gen X) have any effect on the employee loyalty and commitment of the 21st Century workforce. The Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Intelligence & Security also asked us to develop tools that could be used by organizations to improve loyalty and commitment among their employees as a means of enhancing their contribution to the counter-insider threat mission. This Research Note summarizes the results of our research and describes our approach to designing and developing those tools.

Method

We first reviewed research on the factors that contribute to commitment, loyalty, and retention in the workforce, focusing on factors related to differences between generations. We accessed multiple search engines and databases (e.g., Google Scholar, ProQuest, and PubMed) using keywords such as generational effects on loyalty, commitment, workforce, turnover risk, and retention. We also reviewed white papers and other toolkits developed by private and public organizations. We retrieved 174 articles and entered them into a spreadsheet by category and content theme. We also ranked the articles by their relevance to our research.

Next, we developed interview questions about whether generational differences affect loyalty in the DoD and civilian workforces and about which factors are most important for improving loyalty and commitment. Using these questions, we interviewed four subject matter experts (SMEs) with knowledge and expertise in generational research. The SMEs were trained in military sociology, organizational management, diversity and inclusion, and communication and had backgrounds in social problems in the military and industry. They also were experienced in identifying factors associated with loyalty in large and small workplaces. We entered our SME interview notes into a structured worksheet to identify themes, which we used to guide our additional literature reviews. We coded SME interviews thematically to identify explicit strategies that organizations could implement to increase employee loyalty and commitment. We used the themes extracted from the interviews (described in the 21st Century Loyalty and Commitment Guidebook" section of this report) to further refine our literature review and included them in the development of the tools.

Results

In this section, we summarize our research on defining loyalty and commitment, generational challenges in the workforce, and generational effects on loyalty and commitment. Through our literature review findings and interviews with SMEs, we identified evidence-based strategies that could be tied to the themes identified in the review of the research.

Defining Loyalty and Commitment

Loyalty is defined as a strong feeling of support and allegiance attributed to individuals with "a wholehearted commitment to a cause" (Mullin, 2005). An individual is loyal when they exhibit the disposition to persist in an intense commitment in order to secure the interests, or well-being, of that which he or she is loyal to (Kleinig, 2017), such as an organization. Based on these definitions, loyalty requires commitment. A key concept within the behavioral science literature is that organizational commitment is key to an employee's commitment to a mission or cause. Three components of organizational commitment serve as essential "bonding agents" that connect the employee with the organization—affective, continuance, and normative commitment (Meyer & Allen, 1991). **Affective commitment** reflects the employees' emotional bond to their organization and is a determinant of dedication and loyalty (Rhoades et al., 2001). Employees who exhibit affective commitment display a sense of belonging that further reinforces their contributions and commitment to the mission and goals of an organization (Rhoades et al., 2001). The two other components of organizational commitment also promote loyalty to an organization. **Continuance commitment** reflects the employee's need to stay with the organization and their perception of the tangible benefits associated with staying such as health insurance, retirement contributions, and tuition reimbursements. **Normative commitment** reflects the employees' belief that they should stay with the organization; that is, they feel obligated to reciprocate commitment and loyalty because they received compensation and benefits from the organization (Meyer & Allen, 1991).

Of the three components of organizational commitment, affective commitment has demonstrated meaningful relationships to insider threat. An employee's affective commitment can make information security threats personally relevant to them and impact their ability to adapt effectively. Posey and colleagues (2015) propose that individuals who exhibit high affective organizational commitment will respond more effectively to information security threats compared to those exhibiting less affective commitment. To this end, one study found a positive correlation between organizational commitment and protective security behaviors (Stanton et al., 2003). Likewise, less

committed individuals who do not align their values consistently with those of the organization are less likely to apply additional effort in protecting such values, precisely because the threats to the organization are not relevant to them. From an analysis of data from U.S. information security professionals, Posey and colleagues (2015) concluded that those with low organizational commitment are less effective at responding to potential threats within the organization, whereas employees who are highly committed are more motivated to engage in proactive behaviors to counter threats. As it relates to countering threats, identifying with and being exposed to organizational norms enhances prosocial behaviors that positively affect policy compliance intentions (Li et al., 2010).

Generational Composition in the Modern Workforce

The current U.S. workforce consists of four generations working together, more than at any other time in history (Delgado et al., 2020). The predominant generational cohorts in the workforce are the baby boomers (people born between 1946 and 1964), Generation X (born between 1965 and 1980), millennials (born between 1980 and 1996), and Generation Z (born after 1997). Organizations are faced with an unprecedented and ongoing shift in generational composition. Baby boomers are in the process of leaving the workforce (Fry, 2015), creating a workforce shortage that is projected to worsen in a wide range of industries over the next decade (Hartman, 2016). Millennials have become the largest generation to fill this gap in the workforce (Fry, 2015; Gallup, 2016). Furthermore, a recent Gallup poll reported that 21% of millennials have changed jobs within the last year, three times more than nonmillennials (Adkins, 2021; Gallup, 2016). This report also suggests that millennials are more apt to pursue new job opportunities for various reasons, including better wages, and because of a lack of attachment to their current roles. While it is important to focus on factors to maximize retention, loyalty, and commitment, it should be noted that millennials do not change jobs any more frequently than young adults in previous generations (Pew, 2017; Molloy & Wozniak, 2020).

Challenges With Generational Research

A significant challenge for research on generational differences is in distinguishing the possible causes of any differences observed. Studies have been unsuccessful in separating the effects of age and experience (e.g., Parry & Urwin, 2011). For example, the finding that millennials are more likely to report leaving an organization than baby boomers could be because millennials recently entered the workforce and are exploring options for the right career path (Woodward et al., 2015). Likewise, the older generations may be at a later stage in life with longer tenure at an organization, making it riskier to start over at a new organization.

Are There Generational Differences in Loyalty and Commitment?

Loyalty and commitment have been researched across generations by monitoring retention, organizational attachment, and job satisfaction. These studies have reported some generational differences in work-related outcomes. However, the effects are generally weak, and the results are mixed.

A meta-analysis of 18 studies with data on approximately 2,000 subjects examined whether there were generational differences in employees' intent to leave an organization, job satisfaction, and organizational commitment (Costanza et al., 2012). The most significant observation was that younger generations tended to leave their jobs more frequently than older generations. However, age

(and career stage), tenure, and education were almost as strongly correlated with intention to leave an organization. Second, older generations tended to rate higher in job satisfaction compared to younger generations (Costanza et al., 2012). Studies also found mixed results when looking at the organizational commitment of older versus younger generations, probably because other variables are likely to contribute to organizational commitment such as organizational support, role clarity, and organizational justice.

Thinking Beyond the Generational Perspective

As an alternative to focusing on generational cohorts, organizational researchers propose a framework in which a cohort of people is defined by the shared experiences of specific events within a shared time frame. A shared time frame could be the entry into a particular organization (Joshi et al., 2010). In addition to the thoughts and behaviors learned throughout one's formative life course experiences, a cohort should be understood independent of age and could be influenced by organizational factors such as tenure, workplace environment, and successive entry into an organization. Based on this framework, one can think beyond an age-based generational cohort and define a cohort by the experiences of a set of individuals who enter an organization and undergo its orientation processes at the same time. For them, the time of entry into an organization is the pivotal factor by which they collectively experience similar events (e.g., hardship, tragedy, and/or success) and interact with people who share similar experiences within the organization, independent of the generational cohort to which they are assigned.

The relationship between organizational commitment and career stage is supported by several models, including the career development model (Super, 1992) and the organizational commitment development model (Mowday et al., 2013). The key idea across these models is that every employee will pass through specific career stages characterized by their specific job duties and psychological adjustment to the organization. These career development models also emphasize the effect of an employee's career stage on the strength of the relationship between organizational commitment and retention, intention to leave, performance, and absenteeism.

A meta-analysis examining whether career stage moderates the relationship between organizational commitment and performance outcomes, including retention, intent to leave, and absenteeism, found that the relationship between commitment and turnover (actual and intended) was strongest among individuals early in their career compared to those in the mid and late stages of their career (Cohen, 1991). There were also negative relationships between commitment and performance outcomes and with absenteeism for those later in their career compared to those in the mid and early career stages. By understanding similarities and differences between career stages, managers can develop retention strategies tailored to employees at different stages in their career.

Guidebook and Career Stage Cards Content Development

Using the best practices and management strategies we identified in our review of research related to the SME interview themes, we designed and developed two tools for managers—*21st Century Loyalty and Commitment Guidebook* and *Employee Career Stage Cards*. The guidebook provides first-line managers and supervisors with practical, evidence-based strategies for building lasting employee relationships and commitment to an organization. It is structured around the identified themes from our analysis, offering strategies and infographics to engage the reader. The employee career stage cards are a quick reference to provide managers with strategies to cultivate commitment among

employees at different stages in their career. This tool defines the different types of career stages and identifies employee needs at each career stage and corresponding strategies to address each need. The guidebook provides more in-depth information, while the career stage cards provide a snapshot of each career stage, linking employee needs with potential strategies managers can use to address them. Although the employee career stage cards are designed to accompany the guidebook, each tool can be used independently. Each artifact is described in greater detail below.

21st Century Loyalty and Commitment Guidebook

The literature review and SME interviews revealed five themes—or essential strategies—that can increase loyalty and commitment. We used these five strategies to structure the design of the guidebook for managers. The key strategies are *Promote and Demonstrate the Organization's Mission*, *Foster Employee Well-being*, *Highlight Employee Benefits*, *Focus on Capabilities and Avoid Age-based Stereotypes*, and *Initiate Positive Out-processing Practices*.

Promote and Demonstrate the Organization's Mission

Many employees care deeply about their organization's mission as long as it is meaningful to them and, equally important, the organization lives up to it. These employees are more likely to exhibit affective commitment toward the organization. Research shows that improving the goal clarity, impact, and inspiration of an organization's mission and vision reduces absenteeism (Wright & Pandey, 2011). One study suggested that what makes the current younger generations unique is how they define success, which they attribute to the quality of social relationships and the values of the organization (Landrum, 2017). Another study found that, in the current older generations, commitment

> Another common finding in the research literature is that the younger generations highly value integrity and social responsibility (e.g., Curtin et al., 2011).

increases due to a higher need for economic stability (Konya et al., 2016). Younger generations have a significantly higher desire for authenticity, namely, finding a job they enjoy and being able to express their personal values (Gallup, 2016). Likewise, an employee who does not agree with an organization's mission or thinks the organization is not behaving consistently with their stated mission will likely become less committed to the organization. While managers may not be able to directly change or improve the organization's mission and vision, clarifying and integrating them into onboarding materials can provide everyday context. Managers should promote the organizational mission as meaningful, relevant, and authentic and demonstrate how the organization lives up to its mission.

Foster Employee Well-being

Organizations that invest in promoting employee well-being increase their chances for success by establishing a resilient and healthy workforce (De Simone, 2014). Examples of promoting well-being include manageable workload, supportive management, promoting positive relationships with coworkers, and allowing employees to have a sense of control in the work environment (Guest & Conway, 2004). Focusing on well-being can lead to lower turnover rates and superior work performance (Lyubomirsky et al., 2005). Employees who rate themselves as having a good sense of well-being in the workplace also rate higher on their intention to stay with the organization (Sears et al., 2013). Thus, managers should create a workplace environment that encourages employees to actively work toward improving and maintaining their well-being, which in turn strengthens their commitment and loyalty to the organization as a whole (Aked et al., 2009).

Highlight Employee Benefits

Another important strategy involves using incentives to increase an employee's commitment to an organization and promote interpersonal trust with leadership (Chong & Eggleton, 2007). Current research on generational diversity in the workforce finds that competitive or rewarding compensation and the need for job security are important motivational factors for all employees, regardless of their generation (Woodward et al., 2015). Providing adequate learning opportunities is also an important motivator for early career professionals. Managers should provide information about benefits offered to the employee as a campaign to boost employee morale, well-being, and commitment to the organization.

Focus on Capabilities and Avoid Age-based Stereotypes

Managers should evaluate any possible age-related stereotypes they may hold that inadvertently discriminate against groups of employees. This is particularly harmful to workplace morale and will further decrease loyalty to the organization.

Millennials have been characterized as having fundamentally different expectations about work than previous generations (Solnet et al., 2012). For instance, the current younger generation has been portrayed in popular media outlets as lazy, comfortable with technology, naive, and unmotivated (Finkelstein et al., 2015); likewise, older generations have been portrayed as costly, out of touch, and obstinate toward change (Posthuma & Campion, 2009). These stereotypes can harm interpersonal relationships and morale in the workplace. When managers focus on inaccurate age stereotypes, they are likely to miss other important factors that determine employee loyalty to an organization.

Managers should recognize that each employee has unique goals, a specific workstyle, and individual behaviors that are independent from others in their generation. Thus they should adapt their leadership style to the ability and willingness of their employees to perform specific work-related tasks rather than to their age (Blanchard, 2019).

Initiate Positive Out-processing Practices

Organizations have the opportunity to promote organizational commitment when an employee leaves the organization. Providing an active line of support and communication during out-processing can preserve the organization's public image and reputation and reduce the risk of release of confidential information. Organizations have an opportunity to manage employee fears and insecurities by encouraging and acknowledging the value they bring to the organization. For example, creating and communicating a plan for an employee's departure can reduce stress and sustain productivity of the remaining employees and increase the likelihood of mutual respect between the organization and the departing employee (Skowronski & Bedi, 2020). Furthermore, an organization with a good reputation can better recruit talent and attract more applicants (Turban & Cable, 2003). An organization's reputation is increasingly important in the digital age. Reviews can be left on employment sites by current and former employees with the potential to strengthen or weaken an organization's reputation and recruitment. To this end, organizations should monitor and record the reasons employees provide for leaving and use the information to develop strategies for retaining employees.

Employee Career Stage Cards

The employee career stage cards reinforce the importance of an employee's career stage on their organizational commitment, retention, intention to leave, performance, and absenteeism, regardless

of their generational cohort. The career cards focus on characteristics of employees at different stages in their career and provide managers with strategies they can use to increase employee loyalty. The employee career stage cards cover four critical stages:

- **Early Career Stage:** Reflects individuals who are seeking work for the first time in their career. They are potentially transitioning from high school, college, or the military or otherwise entering the workforce for the first time. Employees in this career stage require additional assistance to adjust to their new career or to get acclimated to the professional workforce (Chen & Ployhart, 2006). These employees may lack work-specific experience because they are adjusting from academic environments (Profili, 2014). This stage provides an opportunity for exploration, training, and development. With this stage comes the need for active support and guidance from managers and supervisors (Chen & Ployhart, 2006; Profili, 2014). Organizational support is important because economic demands (e.g., student loan debt) are likely stressors and can potentially lead to burnout (James et al., 2011). Organizations should identify employees' interests and capabilities and align them with their position. The need to promote organizational commitment at this early career stage is important for decreasing turnover rates.

- **Mid-Career Stage:** Represents professionals who have been in the workforce long enough to exhibit performance efficiencies or deteriorations. During this career stage, individuals gain the experience and knowledge of the job to enable effective performance. This allows them to shift their focus toward stability and career advancement (Chen & Ployhart, 2006; Profili, 2014). After they adjust to job-specific tasks, their need to establish long-term and strong commitments to work and family becomes more significant (Profili, 2014). Many employees do not experience career issues until they reach this career stage, when they experience higher levels of stress centered not only on work-life balance but also on financial stability and indebtedness (Akkermans et al., 2020).

- **Late Career Stage:** Encompasses those who are approaching the time of transitioning out of the workforce and into retirement. During this career stage, individuals are not looking to progress into new career paths and may be less receptive to supervisor support (Profili, 2014). Instead, they focus more on maintaining interest in their work and mentoring other employees (Profili, 2014). At this stage, they may have a higher need for work-life balance because health and caregiver demands may warrant additional attention, which can lead to burnout (James et al., 2011; Profili, 2014).

- **Mix/Transitional Stage:** Includes those who may be further along in their overall career path but may transition to a new career or position and face new challenges. These employees may have a diverse set of experiences and skill sets. Managers in organizations should translate these employees' relevant experiences and capabilities into their new roles. Organizations should also seek to understand why these employees make career transitions and support them in their new roles (e.g., training to ensure a successful transition, assigning mentors).

Conclusions

To attract and retain employees, managers must foster organizational commitment. Organizations first need to foster genuine commitment across the entire workforce without regard to generational stereotypes that may discriminate against groups of employees. Research provides scarce empirical evidence for reliable generational differences, with many studies reporting mixed results. This

domain of research also has challenging issues that put in question whether such differences support developing organizational strategies to improve loyalty and commitment. Instead, managers should use evidence-based strategies, such as those presented in the tools developed for this project, to increase long-term loyalty and commitment among employees, which in turn can benefit the organization. In response to these issues, we developed a comprehensive guidebook and a set of employee career stage cards that provide strategies for first-line leadership and managers to address this issue within the workforce.

Future Research

While our results reflect the limitations of a small, qualitative, and exploratory study, Our research suggests promising areas for future research, including the following:

- Development of an interactive training for managers that addresses evidence-based strategies and barriers to adopting and using them (e.g., unconscious bias, discomfort, concerns about balancing authority with support)

- Use of innovative methods to monitor employee commitment and loyalty within an organization that can be specifically tailored to the risk assessment program within the C-InT mission

- Assessment of DoD organizational policies and how well they align with best practices to improve and maintain employee loyalty and commitment.

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