

Personal Characteristics, Job Characteristics,  
and Work Experiences as Predictors of  
Organizational Commitment

*J. David McCracken*  
*Keith L. Smith*

*Agricultural Education*  
*The Ohio State University*

*Turiman B. Saundi*

*Universiti Pertanian Malaysia*

The turnover of vocational agriculture teachers and cooperative extension agents frequently results in an interruption of services in local communities. In Ohio, vocational agriculture teacher turnover has traditionally varied between 10% and 15% per year. Agriculture and home economics extension agent turnover has been much less. The turnover of 4-H agents in Ohio, however, has varied between 20% and 25%.

Because of the high turnover among agents, and especially 4-H agents, questions were asked such as: How committed are extension agents to the Cooperative Extension Service? What factors are related to agents' level of commitment?

Commitment means dedication. Both commitment and dedication imply the pledging of oneself or of setting oneself apart for a special purpose. Organizational commitment (Porter, Steers, Mawday, and Boulian, 1974) is characterized by at least three factors: (a) a strong belief in and acceptance of the organization's goals and values, (b) a willingness to exert considerable effort on behalf of the organization, and (c) a strong desire to maintain membership in the organization. Many educators devote much of their lives to service to their clientele.

Why was it considered to be important for extension agents to have a high level of commitment? It seemed logical to assume that the organization and clientele would realize greater productivity from those agents who were intrinsically motivated to be of greater service. Also, research (Koch and Steers, 1978) has shown a higher level of commitment to be related to lower rates of absenteeism and turnover.

There has been increasing interest among professionals, both in industry and education, concerning the concept of commitment. Assessments have been made of the commitment of such professionals as scientists, nurses, and teachers to their employing organizations (Hrebiniak and Alluto, 1972; and Sheldon, 1971).

The theoretical framework for the study was based upon a study by Steers (1977). In that study, the dependent variable of organizational commitment was found to have antecedents (independent variables) which could be classified in three groups: personal characteristics, job characteristics, and work experiences.

## Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to determine the major factors related to organizational commitment among county extension agents in the Ohio Cooperative Extension Service (OCES). The objectives of the study included:

1. To determine the level of commitment among agents in the OCES.
2. To determine whether there were differences in the level of commitment among agents: agriculture, home economics, and 4-H.
3. To determine the relationship between organizational commitment and personal characteristics: age, sex, marital status, tenure, program area, major field of study, and institution.
4. To determine the relationship between organizational commitment and job characteristics: skill variety, task identity, job autonomy, and feedback.
5. To determine the relationship between organizational commitment and work experiences: role clarity, peer group cohesion, group attitudes toward OCES, realization of expectations, first-year job challenge, personal importance, and self-image reinforcement.

## Method

The respondents of the study (Suandi, 1982) were 108 county extension agents in the Ohio Cooperative Extension Service. They were the agriculture agents (n=37), the home economics agents (n=36), and the 4-H agents (n=35). Of the 108 agents surveyed 33 agriculture agents, 31 home economics agents, and 32 4-H agents responded for a total of 96 (89%).

Data were collected by mail questionnaires. The questionnaire was divided into four sections. The first section was designed to provide background information about the agents. The second section measured job characteristics adapted from an original questionnaire developed by Hackman and Lawler (1971). The third section was adapted from work experience scales developed by Buchanan (1974). The final section, developed by Porter, Mawday, and Steers (1979), measured organizational commitment. The reliability (Cronbach's Alpha) of the job characteristics subscales ranged from .55 to .87 and the work experiences subscales ranged from .76 to .88. The reliability of the organizational commitment questionnaire was .90.

## Results and Discussion

On a 7-point scale, the mean level of commitment for all agents was 5.13 (Table 1). This would indicate that most agents were highly committed to the extension organization.

Correlation coefficients of organizational commitment with other variables are in Table 2.

Table 1

*Summary Statistics for the Measure: Organizational Commitment*

Agents	Mean	SD	n
Agriculture	<sup>a</sup> 5.32	0.87	33
Home Economics	5.43	0.93	31
4-H	4.64	1.03	32
All	5.13	1.00	96

<sup>a</sup>Note. The scale was 1=low commitment to 7=high commitment.

### Personal Characteristics

Age and tenure. There was a positive relationship between age and organizational commitment ( $r=.40$ ). This finding was similar to what Sheldon (1971) found with Ph.D. scientists. It indicates that older agents had a higher level of commitment than younger agents. There was also a positive relationship between tenure and organizational commitment ( $r=.34$ ). This finding was similar to what Sheldon (1971) found with Ph.D. scientists. It indicates that agents who had longer tenure were more committed to the OCES than agents who had shorter tenure. Age and tenure were closely interrelated ( $r=.71$ ). Agents who had been employed for a longer period of time would be more familiar with the county situation, its people, and the facts relating to extension. They also are more vested in retirement systems and thus less likely to seek other employment.

Sex. There was a higher level of commitment among the female agents than the male agents. This finding was similar to what Hrebiniak and Alluto (1972) found with school teachers and registered nurses.

Marital status. Agents who were married tended to have higher commitment than those who were single. In one study done by Hrebiniak and Alluto (1972), it was found that single respondents were more likely to leave the organization than those who were married.

Program area. Comparing among the three groups of agents, there was no significant difference in the level of commitment between agriculture agents and home economics agents. However, there was a significant difference in the level of commitment between 4-H agents

Table 2

*Pearson Product Moment Correlation Coefficients for the Major Variables*

Variables	OCQ	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14
1. Age	.40**														
2. Sex	.21*	-.15													
3. Marital status	.09	.42**	-.50**												
4. Tenure	.34**	.71**	-.29**	.45**											
5. Skill variety	.21*	.11	.16	-.04	.00										
6. Task identity	.16	.03	.25**	-.02	-.01	.17									
7. Job autonomy	.44**	.25**	-.01	.18	.25**	.12	.36**								
8. Feedback	.31**	.23*	.06	.14	.06	.11	.07	.12							
9. Role clarity	.45**	.24**	.15	.05	.12	-.06	.13	.20*	.34**						
10. Peer group cohesion	.38**	.17	.16	.08	.07	.27	.30**	.42**	.26**	.18					
11. Group attitudes	.61**	.26**	.04	.10	.14	.17	.00	.26**	.38**	.46**	.26**				
12. Realization of expectations	.51**	.28**	.16	.14	.23*	.03	.07	.31**	.27**	.35**	.38**	.42**			
13. Job challenge	.43**	.19*	.11	.07	.11	.16	.06	.19*	.15	.36**	.14	.35**	.40**		
14. Personal importance	.67**	.37**	.07	.17	.25**	.22*	.09	.33**	.27**	.46**	.38**	.47**	.41**	.63**	
15. Self-image reinforcement	.70**	.42**	.12	.16	.30**	.22*	.07	.44**	.32**	.42**	.49**	.67**	.19*	.37**	.42**

\* p &lt; .05

\*\* p &lt; .01

and agriculture or home economics agents. The low commitment among 4-H agents could be due to the fact that they had shorter tenure than agriculture or home economics agents. It was found that 4-H agents tended to have a higher level of commitment during the first-year period. The commitment level decreased during the second through fourth year period, and then increased again as tenure increased. On the contrary, the levels of commitment among agriculture and home economics agents tended to consistently increase with tenure.

Major field of study. Duncan's test indicated there was no difference in the levels of commitment among agents from different major fields of study at the graduate level. At the undergraduate level there was no significant difference in the levels of commitment of agricultural education majors and other agriculture or home economics majors. But there was a significant difference in the levels of commitment between agents who majored in other areas and agents who majored in agricultural education and other agriculture or home economics. The low commitment level among agents who majored in other areas could be due to the fact that they were not familiar with extension work because their major fields of study were not related to agriculture or home economics.

Institution. Duncan's test indicated that there was no significant difference in the level of commitment among agents from different institutions, both in undergraduate and graduate levels.

### Job Characteristics

Skill variety is the extent to which a job requires a variety of different activities in carrying out the work, and utilizes a number of skills and talents in the process. There was a positive relationship between skill variety and organizational commitment ( $r=.20$ ). This indicates that agents tended to be more committed to the OCES if they believed there was adequate skill variety present in their jobs. The extension administrators and supervisors should ensure that agents' work involves the use of a number of different skills and talents. It should be noted that 4-H agents had lower scores on skill variety compared to agriculture and home economics agents. This implies that 4-H agents perceived that their jobs did not have enough variety.

Task identity is the degree to which the job requires completion of an identifiable piece of work from start to finish. There was no significant relationship between task identity and organizational commitment.

Job autonomy is the extent to which the job provides individual discretion in scheduling work and determining procedures. There was a positive relationship between job autonomy and organizational commitment ( $r=.44$ ). This implies that agents tended to be more com-

mitted to the OCES if they perceived that there was adequate autonomy in doing their work. Supervisors should make sure that agents have substantial freedom and independence in planning, implementing, and evaluating extension programs.

Feedback is the degree to which workers perceive that they receive clear information about the effectiveness of their performance. There was a positive relationship between feedback and organizational commitment ( $r=.31$ ). This finding was similar to what Porter and Steers (1973) found with psychiatric technicians. This indicates that agents tended to be more committed to the OCES if they perceived that they had received an adequate amount of feedback on their work performances. It was found that the overall mean score on feedback was low for all agents. This indicates that many agents perceived they had not received enough feedback on their work performances. The writer believes agents should be informed about how well they are performing their jobs and also whether their performance is improving, deteriorating, or remaining the same. Positive feedback is important because it increases agents' feelings of personal worth about their work.

### Work Experiences

Role clarity is the degree to which agents understand what they are supposed to do on the job. There was a positive relationship between role clarity and organizational commitment ( $r=.45$ ). This finding was similar to what Buchanan (1974) found with business and government managers. This indicates that agents tended to be more committed to the OCES if they were clear on what to do on the job. It is the responsibility of the supervisors to let agents know exactly what to do during the process of program planning, program strategy, program implementation, and program evaluation.

Peer group cohesion represents a feeling of solidarity among agents. There was a positive relationship between peer group cohesion and organizational commitment ( $r=.38$ ). This is similar to what Sheldon (1971) found with Ph.D. scientists. It indicates that agents tended to be more committed to the OCES if they had close friendships within the organization. Frequent contacts and meetings among agents and supervisors are necessary to establish better relationships.

Group attitudes toward OCES is the attractiveness of the work group towards the organization. There was a positive relationship between group attitudes and organizational commitment ( $r=.61$ ). This finding was similar to what Buchanan (1974) found with managers. It indicates that agents tended to be more committed to the OCES if they worked with other agents who expressed positive attitudes toward the OCES.

Realization of expectations is the consistency between what was expected and what was found during the first year of work. Consis-

tent with what Sheldon (1971) found, there was a positive relationship between realization of expectations and organizational commitment ( $r=.51$ ). This implies that agents tended to be more committed to the OCES if most of their expectations were met. Some agents perceived that their expectations before joining the OCES were different from what they found after joining it. Job descriptions and time and effort expectations should be communicated to agents who are beginning with the OCES.

First-year job challenge is the extent to which jobs were perceived as challenging and interesting. Consistent with what Buchanan (1974) found, there was a positive relationship between job challenge and organizational commitment ( $r=.43$ ). Extension administrators should be concerned with the low level of commitment among 4-H agents. Job analysis may be necessary to revise the job requirements and responsibilities of 4-H agents. Some 4-H agents believed they did not have specific job responsibilities compared to what were given to agriculture or home economics agents. The notion of job enrichment in 4-H may be considered by the extension administrators to make 4-H work more challenging and interesting.

Personal importance represents a feeling of making significant and appreciated contributions to the organization. There was a positive relationship between personal importance and organizational commitment ( $r=.67$ ). It indicates that agents tended to be more committed to the OCES if they perceived that they had given substantial contributions to the OCES. The extension administrators and supervisors should always remind the agents that their work is important to the clientele. Frequent feedback should be provided to agents by administrators and clientele.

Self-image reinforcement is the extent to which the personnel are encouraged to behave in ways that represent their true feelings or attitudes. There was a positive relationship between self-image reinforcement and organizational commitment (.70). This is similar to what Buchanan (1974) found with business and government managers. Many agents perceived that they were not able to establish their own self-image in the OCES. In other words, many agents believed there was often pressure to behave in ways that did not represent their true feelings. This variable was the one most highly related to organizational commitment.

The results of this study were generally consistent with previous findings of other researchers in the field of organizational psychology. From the stepwise multiple regression analysis, self-image reinforcement was found to be the best single predictor of organizational commitment. The best group predictor of organizational commitment included the following variables: personal importance, group attitudes toward OCES, job autonomy, sex, and tenure (Table 3).

Self-image reinforcement was dropped as an independent variable from the stepwise multiple regression equation. The variance explained by self-image reinforcement was accounted for by the other independent variables in the analysis.

Table 3

*Step-Wise Multiple Regression of Organizational Commitment on Five Independent Variables*

Variables	R	R <sup>2</sup>	R <sup>2</sup> Increment	Beta	F
Personal importance	.6733	.4533	.4533	.5486	77.95*
Group attitudes	.7507	.5635	.1102	.3258	60.04*
Job autonomy	.7732	.5979	.0344	.2133	45.62*
Sex	.7914	.6264	.0285	.3393	38.14*
Tenure	.8172	.6678	.0414	.2306	36.19*

\* p < .001

It appears that extension agents and extension administrators could have some impact on the overall feeling of dedication within the Cooperative Extension Service. Factors which might be influenced by adjusting the organizational climate, include self image reinforcement, personal importance, group attitudes, and job autonomy. The lower level of commitment among 4-H agents with two to four years tenure as compared to those with one year might be resolved with better orientation of new agents to the job and organizational expectations. While the level of dedication among all agents appears to be high, the Cooperative Extension Service should continue to strive to maintain a climate which fosters highly committed agents whose primary interest is in serving their clientele.

This study has provided some evidence that there are factors related to agents' commitment toward the Ohio Cooperative Extension Service. This evidence can be used in hypothesizing and testing for vocational agriculture teachers relationships between organizational commitment and similar factors. Once the factors related to organizational commitment are known, one can use the information in recruitment and selection, and in changing the organization so that greater commitment can be achieved.

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