

Mission Attachment and Satisfaction as Factors in Employee Retention

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Nonprofit organizations rely on the mission to attract resources and guide decision making. Increasingly, mission statements are recognized as a strong management tool that can motivate employees and keep them focused on the organization's purpose. This research investigated employee attitudes toward the mission in a youth and recreation service organization. In general, the employees expressed positive attitudes toward the organization's mission, and those attitudes were related to employee satisfaction and intentions to remain with the organization. However, dissatisfaction with pay tended to override employee's mission attachment as explanation of why they may leave the organization. The implication is that mission might be salient in attracting employees but less effective in retaining them.

THE CORE of every nonprofit organization is its mission (Angelica, 2001; Glasrud, 2001). More than a statement or a symbol, the mission is a tool that provides a clear, compelling statement of purpose that the organization disseminates both internally and externally. A mission statement helps define an organization, expressing its values and envisioning its future simply and clearly. Often, the mission statement attracts clients, donors, funders, employees, and volunteers to an organization. Experts recognize that relying on the mission as a management tool is an effective strategy to improve performance in nonprofits (Drucker, 1990; Garner, 1989; Herman and Heimovics, 1991; Knauft, Berger, and Gray, 1991; Mason, 1996; Pearce and David, 1987; Sawhill and Williamson, 2001; Sheehan, 1996). Even for-profit organizations have touted the mission statement as a fundamental management tool. For example, Warren Bennis, an

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authority on nonprofit organizations, recognized the significance and importance of missions when he stated the following: “at the heart of every great group is a shared dream. All great groups believe that . . . they could change the world. . . . That belief is what brings the necessary cohesion and energy to their work” (Hesselbein and Cohen, 1999, p. 317).

A mission statement identifies operational objectives, gives staff goals to direct its behavior, describes performance standards, and speaks to organizational survival and vision for the future (Smith, Heady, Carson, and Carson, 2001).

Several aspects of nonprofits compel them to keep the mission central in decision making (Fairhurst, Jordan, and Neuwirth, 1997). First, the mission is the bottom line for nonprofits (Sawhill and Williamson, 2001; Sheehan, 1996). Without a clear financial bottom line to guide their decision making, nonprofits must use the mission as a management tool that sets an agenda (Garner, 1989; Watad and Ospina, 1999). Second, many nonprofits exhibit the characteristics of loosely coupled organizations (Orton and Weick, 1990), with a decentralized organizational structure in which the manager does not directly control the activities of a program or staff member (Anthony and Young, 1989; Hasenfeld, 1983). This is further complicated because many individuals in nonprofits conceptualize money as a means to accomplish larger objectives and not as an end in itself, either personally or organizationally (Mason, 1996). This suggests that financial incentives and controls might be less effective in nonprofits. These constraints cause managers to use strategies that draw on employees’ intrinsic motivations rather than on the extrinsic motivation of money. It is the expressive benefit (participating in something one believes in) that attracts and may retain paid and unpaid employees in nonprofits (Mason, 1996). The presence of a salient mission statement reminds employees of the purpose of their work and helps managers guide employees in the fulfillment of that mission.

Despite the mission’s significant and fundamental role in the management and leadership of nonprofits, we know relatively little about how employees perceive the mission and how those perceptions relate to other organizational attitudes (such as satisfaction) and behaviors (such as turnover). Mission statements are formal declarations of organizational values. Several studies have investigated employee perceptions of organizational values (for example, Kristof, 1996). Consistently, those studies have found that a better match between employee and organizational values predicts commitment and satisfaction (O’Reilly, Chatman, and Caldwell, 1991). Jeavons (1994) recognized that nonprofits need employees who share the organization’s values because those employees enact the mission in the programs and services they provide. As a result, they are critical in upholding the organization’s public image and in accomplishing its purpose. Exploring employee attitudes toward the mission can inform its relevance in retaining employees.

A multitude of factors explains why employees remain in or leave an organization, but scholars have consistently recognized employees' expressed intentions to stay as a reliable precursor to actual turnover and as reflective of employee commitment to the organization (Maertz and Campion, 1998; Griffeth, Hom, Gaertner, 2000; Hom and Griffeth, 1995; Hom and Kinicki, 2001). As we mentioned earlier, a better match between employee and organizational values is related to employee attraction and turnover (Werbel and Gilliland, 1999). In one of the few studies that looked specifically at organizational missions and retention, Rycraft (1994) found that child welfare caseworkers identified mission as the most prominent explanation of why they stayed. They believed in the organization's purpose and recognized their role in fulfilling that purpose. Specifically, interviews with twenty-three caseworkers identified mission, goodness of fit, supervision, and investment as four reasons for staying on the job.

In addition, employees' job satisfaction has a consistent and negative association to their expressed intentions to stay and a positive association to their perception of congruence with organizational values (Aryee, Luk, and Stone, 1998; Mitchell and others, 2001; Samantrai, 1992; Spector, 1997). One can investigate job satisfaction as either an overall attitude toward the work experience or as multiple components, including attitudes toward compensation, coworkers, and one's roles and tasks. For example, Poulin and Walter (1992) found job satisfaction among social workers was related to employees' intentions to stay. The researchers investigated factors such as satisfaction with compensation, supervisors, and coworkers, in addition to overall attitudes of satisfaction. They found that overall satisfaction was negatively associated with turnover intentions. Satisfaction with pay or compensation is of particular interest because it may be the counterpart to relying on the mission to motivate and keep employees (Preyra and Pink, 2001). The nature of nonprofits places an expectation on employees to work for the cause, not the paycheck. Furthermore, nonprofits in general are unable to compete with for-profit organizations in providing pay and incentives (Brandel, 2001). Several studies (for example, Bretz, Boudreau, and Judge, 1994; Heneman and Judge, 2000) have documented the negative association of turnover and perceived satisfaction with pay (Werbel and Gilliland, 1999). Barber and Bretz (2000) recognize, however, that more work needs to be done in the area of understanding how compensation attitudes are associated with employees' perceptions of value congruence and retention.

An additional consideration is that employees' dispositional and descriptive characteristics explain tendencies toward positive and negative attitudes toward the organization. For example, age, tenure, and position have all been shown to influence employees' commitment and satisfaction (Griffeth, Hom, and Gaertner, 2000). Older, longtime, and managerial-level employees tend to express

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more commitment to the organization. Conversely, part-time employees perceive organizational entry and exit as easier and more fluid (Sightler and Adams, 1999). The tendency to work for a while, leave the organization as necessary, and return at another time is not uncommon among part-time employees. However, researchers found no significant difference in job satisfaction between part-time and full-time employees (Lewis, 1998; Tansky, Gallagher, and Wetzel, 1997). Although they discuss several reasons, these scholars propose that many individuals work part-time by choice, perhaps to better accommodate work and family arrangements, to supplement other employment or schoolwork, or to explore career opportunities. To the extent that individuals are not barred from gaining full-time employment if they want it (for example, by insufficient job opportunities), these scholars anticipate that levels of satisfaction should be comparable between part-time and full-time employees. What is not clear is how both types of employees perceive the organization's mission and how those perceptions relate to satisfaction and commitment as identified by the employees' intentions to stay with the organization.

At least three basic principles influence employee attitudes toward the mission: awareness, agreement, and alignment. First, the organization's purpose (that is, its mission) must be salient in the employees' minds. Are they and their coworkers aware of the organization's mission and values? Second, employees must agree with the expressed purpose and values of the organization. If employees are going to work diligently for what may be lower compensation, they need to perceive agreement between their values and the organization's (Kristof, 1996). Third, employees must perceive a connection between their work and the fulfillment of that mission (Mason, 1996). A lack of alignment between their work activities and the fulfillment of a significant and important mission could lead to dissatisfaction and potentially lower levels of commitment. Awareness of the mission, agreement with its principles, and confidence in one's ability to help carry it out are fundamental aspects of one's attachment to the organization's mission.

Based upon this review, we recognize three things: (1) different types of employees hold different attitudes toward their work and the organization; (2) satisfaction and commitment are positively related to each other; and (3) values congruence should contribute to both. These same associations should play out in nonprofits that rely on the mission to communicate those values and guide decision making. Our research investigated how employee attitudes toward the mission were related to satisfaction and to what extent attitudes toward the mission accounted for expressed intentions to stay with the organization. First, one must investigate the extent to which different types of employees hold different attitudes toward the organization, especially toward the mission. If part-time employees in general express similar levels of satisfaction with their work but

lower levels of commitment, we would expect that they would hold similar, if not higher, attachment to the organization's mission. If they have choices in employment, why not select an organization they believe in? This leads to the first set of hypotheses:

HYPOTHESIS 1a. *Full-time and part-time employees will express similar levels of satisfaction and mission attachment.*

HYPOTHESIS 1b. *Compared to part-time employees, full-time employees will express stronger intentions to stay with the organization.*

As the literature recognizes, values congruence should contribute to employee satisfaction and commitment. Similarly, mission attachment should reflect those same associations.

HYPOTHESIS 2. *There will be a positive association between mission attachment, employee satisfaction, and expressed intentions to stay.*

Of final consideration is the extent that mission attachment might account for employees' intentions to stay with or leave the organization, independent of satisfaction or other general predictors of commitment. In particular, we would expect the influence of mission attachment to be the most salient in nonprofits.

HYPOTHESIS 3. *Mission attachment will explain employees' intentions to stay, above and beyond aspects of satisfaction and demographic variables.*

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Participants and Procedures

An anonymous survey was distributed to 991 employees of a non-profit youth and recreation services organization with sixteen geographically dispersed locations. Executives at each branch facilitated the distribution and collection of surveys, which an independent research center analyzed. To retain anonymity employees could drop surveys in a collection box at each branch or mail them directly to the organization's main office. Branch size ranged considerably, from as few as fourteen employees to as many as 130. A total of 304 completed surveys were returned (31.6 percent response rate). Fifty-four percent of the respondents ($n = 165$) classified themselves as part-time; 112 respondents (37 percent) indicated that they were full-time employees; and 9 percent ($n = 27$) did not specify. Almost 70 percent (67.4 percent) of the respondents were female; 28.9 percent were male. Eleven individuals (3.6 percent) did not specify.

Measures

Several demographic variables were measured to control for the effect on expressed intentions to stay with the organizations (Griffeth,

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Hom, and Gaertner, 2000). Age was assessed using categorical age brackets. Thirty-three percent of the respondents indicated they were between the ages of eighteen and twenty-five; 27.6 percent indicated they were twenty-six to thirty-five, accounting for over 60 percent of the respondents. Position was measured as full-time (scored as one) and part-time (scored as zero). Time with the organization (that is, tenure) was measured in months. Part-time employees had been with the organization for an average of 23.75 ($SD = 30.16$) months, whereas full-time employees had been with the organization for slightly over forty-six months ($SD = 48.64$). The organization's proprietary survey instrument was used to assess employee attitudes. Respondents answered all questions on a four-point scale, on which lower scores indicated higher levels of agreement. All variables identified as reflecting a construct were factor analyzed to verify that they were associated with a single component. When more than one factor was present, items were dropped or separate factors were developed. Two components of satisfaction were investigated: overall satisfaction (four questions) and satisfaction with compensation (four questions). Employees on average expressed satisfaction with their work ($\alpha .77$; $M = 1.98$, $SD = .58$) and dissatisfaction with pay ($\alpha .83$; $M = 2.64$, $SD = .71$). Mission attachment was assessed through four statements by which employees could gauge their awareness and contribution to the organization's mission ($\alpha .76$; $M = 1.77$, $SD = .56$). Specific statements used to assess mission attachment were the following:

<i>Component</i>	<i>Statement</i>
Awareness	I am well aware of the direction and mission of [organization name].
Awareness	The programs and staff at my branch support the mission of [organization name].
Agreement	I like to work for [organization name] because I believe in its mission and values.
Alignment	My work contributes to carrying out the mission of [organization name].

Career intentions were assessed through a single item that asked employees about their intentions to stay with the organization for the length of a career. In addition, respondents were asked to explain why they would or would not stay with the organization for a career. These qualitative responses were analyzed to further explain their responses.

Results

Hypothesis 1A states that full-time and part-time employees will express similar levels of satisfaction and mission attachment, and Hypothesis 1B states that full-time employees will express stronger

intentions to stay with the organization when compared to part-time employees. A comparison of mean scores across measures of satisfaction and mission attachment revealed no significant difference between full-time and part-time employees. Conversely, part-time employees were significantly less likely to indicate an intention to stay with the organization ($M = 2.60$, $SD = .83$), whereas full-time staff were more likely to indicate that they intended to make a career with the organization ($M = 2.05$, $SD = .86$; $t = 5.19$, $df = 259$, $p < .001$). Forty-three percent of the part-time employees indicated they probably or definitely would stay, whereas 70 percent of the full-time employees indicated that they would stay. The analysis supports Hypotheses 1A and 1B (see Table 1).

A correlation analysis was conducted to explore the association between mission attachment, employee satisfaction, and expressed intentions to stay (see Table 2). All facets of satisfaction were positively correlated with each other, mission attachment, and intentions to stay, which supports Hypothesis 2.

To test Hypothesis 3, a stepwise regression analysis was conducted to determine the extent to which control variables (tenure and age), facets of satisfaction, and mission attachment accounted for variance in intentions to stay with the organization. Based upon different levels of attachment to the organization, separate analysis was conducted for full-time and part-time employees (see Table 3).

Table 1. Mean Scores and Comparison of Full- and Part-Time Employee Attitudes by Time Status

Variable	All Respondents N = 304				Full Time N = 112		Part Time N = 165	
	Mean	SD	t	df	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Mission attachment	1.77	.56	0.13	273	1.76	.56	1.77	.56
Satisfaction overall	1.98	.58	-1.06	275	2.01	.62	1.93	.55
Satisfaction with pay	2.64	.71	0.14	272	2.64	.73	2.65	.71
Intention to stay	2.37	.90	5.19*	259	2.05	.86	2.60	.83

* $p < .001$.

Table 2. Correlation of Variables in Analysis

	1	2	3	4
1. Mission attachment	(.76)			
2. Satisfaction	.63*	(.77)		
3. Pay satisfaction	.35*	.52*	(.83)	
4. Intention to stay	.43*	.49*	.45*	N/A
N	301	304	299	285

Notes: Values in parentheses are alpha coefficients for measurement scales. Total possible N = 304.

* $p < .001$.

Table 3. Regression on Intentions to Stay Before Each Step

Step	Variable	Full Time				Part Time			
		β^a	T	ΔR^2	ΔF	β^a	T	ΔR^2	ΔF
1	Control			.007	.36			.14	12.20**
	Age	-.04	-0.40			-.37	-4.87**		
	Tenure	-.08	-0.76			.001	0.02		
2	Satisfaction								
	Overall	.63	7.77**	.39	60.40**	.47	7.10**	.22	50.35**
	Pay	.20	2.11*	.03	4.45*	.26	3.30**	.04	10.86**
3	Mission attachment	.12	1.15			.21	2.38*	.02	5.69*

$R^2 = .42, F(4,94) = 17.06, p = .000$

$R^2 = .42, F(5,147) = 21.59, p = .000$

^aStandardized β before each step.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .001$.

Among part-time employees, older employees were more likely to indicate intentions to stay; but overall satisfaction, pay satisfaction, and mission are considerations in such a decision. Overall satisfaction accounts for 22 percent of the variance in expressed intentions to stay, and satisfaction with pay accounts for another 4 percent. Once the satisfaction variables have been entered, the employees' commitment to the mission accounts for an additional 2 percent of the variance in intentions to stay. Among full-time employees, overall satisfaction ($r^2 = .39$) and pay satisfaction ($r^2 = .03$) accounted for variance in career intentions. No other control variable or mission attachment exhibited a potentially significant beta score. Hypothesis 3, which states that mission attachment will account for variance in intentions to stay above and beyond demographic and satisfaction variables, was supported for part-time employees but not for full-time employees.

A content analysis of open-ended qualitative responses to explain why employees did or did not intend to stay was conducted. Sixty-two individuals provided comments on why they intend to stay with the organization, and ninety-two individuals provided comments on why they will not stay with the organization. In several instances individuals provided multiple rationales, which were then separated into distinct concepts when appropriate. For example, a respondent might indicate that the pay was not sufficient and that he or she had different career interests (for example, teaching). Each concept was then categorized according to relevant themes.

In the responses of those who indicated that they would not stay, we identified three themes: other career plans, insufficient pay and opportunities, and frustration with management. The most common explanation was related to careers: they had either other career plans (thirty comments) or another career or job already (ten comments). These comments tended to reflect the temporary or part-time nature of the work (for example, "college job"). The second most prevalent explanation was related to pay and workload: the pay was not satisfactory (twenty-one comments), or there was too much work (for example, three comments mentioned burnout). Some of these comments were very simple ("not enough pay"), while others were more explanatory ("salary is not always equal to the amount of work expected"). The final set of comments was conceptualized as frustration with management. This was expressed in two ways: the organization is "not run well" (eight comments), or the organization "doesn't reflect the mission" (seven comments), which results in perceived inconsistencies in management's rhetoric and actions.

We identified three broad areas as explanations of why individuals intend to stay: belief in the mission and the desire to help people, satisfaction with the organization and coworkers, and satisfaction with their job and opportunities for personal and professional growth. Consistent with the quantitative analysis, respondents cited general satisfaction with the organization and coworkers (for

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example, “I enjoy working here” and “I like the people and atmosphere”: twenty-one comments) and mission attachment (for example, “I believe in the mission”: twenty-two comments) as prominent explanations of why individuals intended to stay with the organization. Some respondents identified job-specific satisfaction (for example, “I like my job”: six comments) and opportunities for growth (eight comments), but these were less prominent. In addition, we identified two contingencies, which respondents often expressed as “I’ll stay if these things get better.” The most often cited contingencies were concerns over poor pay (six comments), workload (three comments), and management (six comments). Respondents provided several other comments, but these did not easily blend to represent distinct concepts.

Discussion

In general, employees felt committed to the mission and appreciated their role in its fulfillment. However, on average they expressed dissatisfaction with compensation practices. Satisfaction and mission attachment were both positively associated with each other and intentions to stay with the organization. Those who felt happy with their work overall and facets of it were more likely to indicate that they believed in the mission of the organization and that their work contributed to the fulfillment of that mission. Similarly, they were more inclined to say that they would stay with the organization for a career. The qualitative responses provide some support for this conclusion by identifying a significant number of comments that specify the mission and general satisfaction as reasons for staying with the organization.

Other than general career interests that diverge from the opportunities at this organization, pay satisfaction was of fundamental importance when considering intentions to stay. We found among employees in this organization a fairly consistent perception that they were underpaid, and that sentiment coincides with attitudes about staying with the organization. The importance of overall satisfaction and pay satisfaction was further revealed when we considered responses from only full-time employees, for whom mission attachment did not explain career intentions. Mission attachment appears to be a valid consideration for younger, part-time employees, but the intrinsic motivations run thin as full-time employees earn salaries that appear noncompetitive to other organizations. These concerns were apparent in the open-ended comments as well. Once we considered comments from those that have other career interests and perceive the position as only temporary (for example, part-time employees), we found that compensation dissatisfaction was paramount. This concern also appeared in the comments of those who indicated they might stay with the organization. Many specified that their propensity to stay was contingent on adequate compensation.

What we do not know is how the organization might encourage more part-time employees to consider the organization as a viable career alternative. If these individuals believe in the mission and generally feel satisfied with their work experiences, why won't they consider the organization for a career? This research suggests that compensation is a factor that may help employees to rule out the organization as a possibility. A corollary argument is that low pay ensures that those who stay really value the mission and the organization. They stay because they believe they contribute to making the community a better place and are willing to sacrifice lucrative compensation packages. Unfortunately, full-time employees express sentiments that override that belief; if they are going to stay, it is because they are satisfied overall with their work and their pay. This is further revealed when considering length of employment (that is, tenure). Long-time employees (those on the job for eighteen months or more) expressed only slightly higher levels of mission attachment than those who had been with the organization only a short while.

Limitations with this study suggest that readers should apply some caution when interpreting the results. This is an analysis of only one organization's employees at one point in time. Consequently, the results might reflect the nature and character of this organization rather than a trend for all nonprofits. In addition, we developed this assessment of mission attachment for the study, and it will require continued validation. For example, additional research could consider how mission attachment might influence employee performance, absenteeism, and turnover. Investigating other attitudes and behaviors might reveal mediating factors that help explain how mission attachment influences expectations and satisfaction related to pay and management practices. Society often places high expectations of ethical behavior on nonprofits. If employees perceive that they make sacrifices for the organization (for example, receiving low compensation), they will expect management to uphold the mission. Tracking employee attitudes, behaviors, and mission attachment over time might inform how employees, who might stay with the organization because of their belief in the mission, perceive career opportunities.

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