

# Revisiting the potential of human capital development to predict commitment: an empirical approach

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – *The purpose of this paper is to revisit the potential of human capital development to predict commitment from an empirical perspective. This followed the fact that while organisations continue to invest a lot of resources into development of their human capital, a growing tendency of the trained staff to quickly abandon the organisation and move on to search for greener pastures has also been registered.*

**Design/methodology/approach** – *This study takes a positivistic approach. It is an explanatory, cross-sectional study that is based on a case study approach.*

**Findings** – *The findings revealed that developing human resources still leads to enhanced commitment among staff. The findings provide empirical support for the tenets of the human capital development theory.*

**Research limitations/implications** – *Investment in development of human resources is still a worthy while cause for organisations as it positively and significantly contributes to commitment.*

**Practical implications** – *While organisations ought to keep watch of the costs that come with human capital development endeavours the practice of developing human resources should be continued as it contributes to the organisational performance of staff.*

**Originality/value** – *The paper deepens the understanding on how human capital development is currently enhancing the commitment of organisational staff in a typical developing economy and sector. Such knowledge provides a clear basis for allocating resources on people development endeavours.*

**Keywords** *Competitive advantage, Commitment, Human capital development*

**Paper type** *Research paper*

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## 1. Background to the study

The importance of investing in and developing human capital as a vital factor of production has continued to gain credit over the years (Son, 2010; Rocha *et al.*, 2017). This is because human capital development contributes to the firm's competitive advantage in many modes (Lee and Lee, 2018; Bowles and Gintis, 2007). It is thus not surprising that even the upsurge of technology during the information age has only managed to supplement rather than derail the pivotal role of human capital towards the organisational success (Fitz-enz, 2000; Olusola 2016; Ndikumana, 2018). The above perspective to knowledge creation and usage indicates that research on human capital development is still highly valued (Sen, 1997; Son, 2010; Knies *et al.*, 2015).

To date, however, there is growing concern about the potential of relying on human capital development to enhance employee commitment and organisational productivity (Wesonga and Chrispen, 2018; Wan, 2007; Thomas *et al.*, 2003). This is because cases of employees leaving organisations to search for higher pay after receiving valuable and costly re-tooling from the organisation are still common place (Emeagwal and Ogbonmwan, 2018). A case in point are the health institutions in Uganda and the neighbouring east African countries that are faced with cases of low commitment among their staff with those that are better skilled tending to seek for greener pastures abroad (see e.g. Ndikumana, 2018; Lutwama *et al.*, 2012; HRH Report, 2015; Njuki and Moronge 2016). The above occurrences raise the possibility that while human capital development is primarily meant to enhance the productive capacity of staff and enable them to take up more strategic roles in the organisation (Sung and Choi, 2018), a significant number of such staff often abandon the

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organisation coupled with other behaviours that are characteristic of an uncommitted work force. The need to reconsider the predictive potential of human capital development on continuous employee commitment is thus of paramount importance as it stands to enable organisations to objectively evaluate the strategies that they base upon to enhance employee commitment.

## 2. Review of theoretical and empirical literature

### 2.1 *Theoretical underpinning of the study*

This study is constructed along the human capital development theory (Becker, 1993; Bowles and Gintis, 2002; Garrick, 1999; Sidorkin, 2007). The theory advances that people are worth investing in as a form of capital, and that the subsequent results can then be considered as a return on investment and assessed in terms of costs and benefits (Wesonga and Chrispen, 2018). In line with the views of Becker (1993), the theory holds that human capital increases a worker's productivity or commitment in executing tasks, and that human beings are motivated by self-interest and operate freely within markets. It holds that education increases worker productivity. The applicability of the theory is further shaped by Schultz (1994), who avers that the usefulness of the theory is more pronounced during changing situations which call upon workers to keep adapting to new ideologies and mechanisms of work. Further, still, the theory submits to the larger perspective in human behaviour based on the economic self-interest of individuals operating within freely competitive markets. The current study is thus rooted on the premise that the human capital development theory (Becker, 1993; Kern, 2009) encourages investment in human capital and that this kind of investment leads to greater outputs which do include among others enhanced employee commitment. This theory is still valued for explaining social-economic occurrences like seeking enhanced commitment among staff from a social perspective by increasing economic investment in human capital development (Lepak and Snell, 1999).

### 2.2 *Empirical literature review on human capital development vs commitment*

Along the arguments of Armstrong (2005), human capital development is used to refer to the development of the knowledge that individuals in the organisation embody which can be used to contribute to its competitiveness. It can also be referred to as the development of the collective skills, knowledge or other intangible assets of individuals that can be used to create economic value for the individuals, their employers or their community. Other scholars like Maran *et al.* (2009) aver that it refers to processes that relate to training, education and other professional initiatives in order to increase the levels of knowledge, skills, abilities, values and social assets of an employee which will lead to the employee's satisfaction.

On the other hand, aligned to the classical works of Porter *et al.* (1974), employee commitment is studied as a uni-dimensional construct tied to one's attachment to the organisation. It is used to describe the degree to which the employee feels devoted to their organisation. There are other competing definitions of commitment by scholars like (Allen and Meyer, 1990; Nangoli *et al.*, 2012), all these however do not deviate from the central idea of commitment as a reflection of the employees' devotion to the organisation.

A study by Lee and Lee (2018) reveals that human capital development positively influences and employee commitment. Human capital development, affected through training and education or schooling, enables an employee to expound more effort on doing work due to the more relevant work methods acquired (Schultz, 1961). Thus, human capital development largely emphasises the significance of education and training as the key tools to rising participation. In fact, notable scholars like Becker (1993) argued that education and training are the most important investment in human capital. In the above perspective, training is perceived as the component of human capital that employees obtain after school. It is thus in form of a collection of skills useful for an industry (Jones and George, 2005; Son, 2010; Rocha *et al.*, 2017). Training is necessary for the employees to perform particular jobs because job requires particular skills and knowledge by which the job is much easier to perform as it is in the benefit of the employee (Tzafir, 2005; Wesonga and Chrispen, 2018). Schooling is the most easily observable component of human capital investments whose importance has been widely researched and document by scholars

like Friedman (2007). Schooling is at times perceived as a reproduction of social relations necessary to promote a disciplined and obedient workforce (Bowles and Gintis 2002). Further, still, there is a number of other scholars like Becker (1993), Nikendei *et al.* (2005) and Wesonga and Chrispen (2018), who also indicate that there is a positive connection between the skill of the employee and higher productivity, level of satisfaction with work, and an enhanced feeling that the job is interesting and rewarding. Relatedly, a study by Wayne *et al.* (1997) indicated that human capital development produces higher levels of organisational commitment. Gibbons and Waldman (2006) also showed that human capital development enhances employee productivity and, thus, commitment.

However, there are deterrents to the use of human capital development as a tool for enhancing commitment too. According to Armstrong (2005), organisations incur costs on effecting human capital development in terms of actual funds invested in equipping employees with new skills, and other intangible costs like lost time during trainings (see also Hsu *et al.*, 2007). Also, studies by Vanche (2006) reveal that the ability of human capital to enhance commitment reduces with time in case the capacitated employee's new level of rewards expected are not met. Therefore, a decision to invest in human capital development must be evaluated to ensure that there is value generated in form of enhanced commitment or other key forms of productivity.

### 3. Methodology of the study

#### 3.1 Research sample

This explanatory, cross-sectional study was undertaken in a hospitality setting. Mayanja memorial hospital in Uganda was chosen as the study area. The choice of the study area was based on the fact that the hospital is one of those that have embraced the practice of continuously developing its human capital. In Uganda, cases of low employee commitment are high in many sectors including the health sector and cases of medical cadres striking are a common issue. The sampling frame was made up of 92 employees (HRH Reports, 2015). Sample selection was based on the criteria by Krejcie and Morgan (1970). Both the Unit of analysis and the Unit of Inquiry in this study were the individual employees.

#### 3.2 Research instrument

Empirical data were collected using a structured questionnaire (Hair *et al.*, 2013). The questionnaires were physically administered to respondents by the data assistant. Respondents were requested to provide responses by filling in the self-administered questionnaire. Generally, questionnaires have the advantage of being above the researcher's effect and variability, which conserves objectivity of collected data, and this is a worthwhile method for conducting studies of a positivistic nature.

Based on the assumption that human capital development is largely an internal marketing strategy aimed at boosting productivity, the independent variable, human capital development, was measured using an adapted and adopted item scale of Ellinger and Cseh (2007) as validated by Waddah and Nooraini (2015). It included the following verbal statements; "This organisation emphasises the development of knowledge and skills in employees as an investment rather than a cost", "This organization prepares its employees to perform well", "This organization embraces Skills and knowledge development of employees as an ongoing process", "This organization teaches employees on 'why they should do things' besides just 'how they should do things'", "This organization trains employees on how to perform their roles", "This organization promotes flexibility and accommodation of differences in needs of employees" and "This organization promotes friendly communication between managers and subordinates". The statements were assessed based on a Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree, to, disagree, not sure, agree and strongly agree.

The criterion variable, employee commitment, was precisely measured using the following verbal avowals adopted from Porter *et al.* (1974), Meyer and Allen (1997), Yosub and Gill (1999) and Homburg and Stock (2005). They included; "I generally Enjoy my work", "I feel my work is interesting and challenging work", "I am satisfied with my job", "I am noticed when I do a good job", "I get full

credit for the work I do”, “There is a lot of variety in my job” and “I feel the level of responsibility I am given is acceptable”. The statements were assessed based on a Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree, disagree, not sure, agree and strongly agree. The Cronbach’s  $\alpha$  and CVI of adopted measures were all greater than 0.7 and thus suited for taking empirical measurements in the chosen organisation.

Instrument validity was tested using the CVI while the instrument reliability was tested using the Cronbach’s  $\alpha$ . Both the CVI (0.73) and Cronbach’s  $\alpha$  (0.85) statistics obtained were above the threshold value 0.7 above which the instrument is deduced to be valid and reliable (Saunders *et al.*, 2007; Hair *et al.*, 2013). Reliability is used to mean dependability while Validity refers to the ability of a scale or measuring instrument to measure what is intended to be measured (Zikmund *et al.*, 2010). The analysis of the data was conducted using SPSS software (version 23).

#### 4. Data analysis, presentation and interpretation of findings

##### 4.1 Response rate

Response rate refers to the portion of respondents who participated in the study out of the selected sample size. In this study, 52 usable questionnaires were obtained from a selected sample of 76 respondents. The computed response rate of 68 per cent shows that the results were not affected by non-response bias, given that it is well above the threshold value of 50 per cent, as recommended by Lindner and Wingenbach (2002).

##### 4.2 Demographic characteristics of the respondents

The demographic features of the sampled respondents are as shown in Table I. Based on the parameter of gender, the respondents were composed of 28 (53.85 per cent) male and 24 (46.15 per cent) female, implying that the final results provide a fairly balanced reflection of views of both the male and female gender. Based on age classification, 9 respondents were in the range of 18–25 years, 23 respondents were in the range of 26–34 years and 20 respondents were above 35 years. Thus, the majority of the respondents were in the range of 26–34 years. This age bracket is often willing to learn and thus presents a good test ground for examining capacity development as a way of influencing long term commitment to the organisation. As regards education level of respondents, 23 of them either had a certificate or a much lower education level; 11 of the respondents had attained a diploma, 16 had a bachelor’s qualification; and only 2 had a Master’s Degree or a much higher qualification. Based on tenure categorisation, majority of the respondents (46.20 per cent) had served the organisation for over five years,

**Table I** Demographic characteristics of the respondents

Item	Classification	Frequency	%
Gender	Male	28	53.85
	Female	24	46.15
	Total	52	100
Age bracket	18–25 years	09	17.30
	26–34 years	23	44.20
	35+ years	20	38.40
	Total	52	100
Level of education	Certificate and below	23	44.20
	Diploma	11	21.20
	Bachelor’s Degree	16	30.80
	Masters and above	02	03.80
Tenure	Below 2 years	22	42.30
	Between 2 and 5 years	06	11.50
	Above 5 years	24	46.20
	Total	52	100

Source: Survey data

11.50 per cent of the respondents had served for between two and five years, while 42.30 per cent had served for less than two years. The results for the tenure of respondents suggest that about half of the employees of the organisation are loyal to the organisation for at least a period of five years.

#### 4.3 Correlation analysis of the study variables

The correlation analysis results are as shown in Table II. Correlation analysis was carried out with the aim of measuring the possibility of any existing linear relationship between human capital development and commitment through determining and interpreting the magnitude and direction of the resulting statistic. This was done using the Pearson Correlation coefficient (Hair *et al.*, 2013; Field, 2009). The resulting relationships are shown in the Table II. Results reveal that there is a significant positive correlation ( $r=0.39$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ) between human capital development and employee commitment. The result suggests that there is a 39 per cent chance that commitment of employees will increase with an increase in human capital development.

#### 4.4 Regression analysis

Regression analysis was executed to reveal the magnitude by which human capital development predicts commitment in of employees in the studied. Prior to running regressions, tests of multiple regression were undertaken to ensure that robust regression results are obtained (Tabachnick and Fidell, 2001). The test results showed that the data were linear, normally distributed, homoscedastic and there was no multicollinearity.

As seen in Table III, the education level of respondents and the respondents' tenure were considered as confounds for the study. These confounds did not have a significant effect on the linkage between the modelled dependent and independent variable as they, respectively, had a

**Table II** Correlation analysis of the study variables

Variable	(1)	(2)
Human capital development (1)	–	
Employee commitment (2)	0.39**	–
	0.01	0.01

Note: \*\*Significant at the 0.01 level (two-tailed)

Source: Survey data

**Table III** Regression analysis of human capital development and employee commitment

Coefficient estimates	B unstd	SE	$\beta$ std	t	Sig.	VIF
(Constant)	2.65	0.55		4.82	0.00	
Education level	0.08	0.08	0.13	0.99	0.33	1.04
Tenure	–0.01	0.07	–0.02	–0.15	0.88	1.08
Human capital development	0.31	0.10	0.41	2.97	0.01	1.11
<i>Model summary statistics</i>						
R		0.42 <sup>a</sup>				
R <sup>2</sup>		0.17				
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>		0.12				
SE of the estimate		0.58				
Durbin–Watson statistic		1.72				
<i>Change statistics</i>						
R <sup>2</sup> change		0.15				
F change		8.82				
Sig.		0.01				

Notes: <sup>a</sup>Dependent variable: employee commitment. \*\*Significant at the 0.01 level (two-tailed)

Source: Survey data

level of significance that is above the established threshold of 0.05. This is evidenced by the respective  $\beta$  values and corresponding significance of 0.08,  $p > 0.05$ , for education level and  $-0.01$ ,  $p > 0.05$ , for employee tenure.

As regards the main objective of the study, which sought to establish the effect of human capital development on employee commitment, the findings in the Table III show that human capital development has a positive and significant effect on employee commitment, ( $r = 0.31$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ) and these results indicate that with each unit increase in human capital development, employee commitment increases by 0.31 units. The findings imply that when an organisation prepares its employees to perform well, embraces knowledge development of employees and teaches the employees about “why they should do things” besides just “how they should do things”, and then, in turn, the employees are found to enjoy their work, and are more committed to the organisation.

The findings also show that the percentage variance in commitment as explained by changes in human capital development, is 17 per cent ( $R^2 = 0.17$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ). This statistic measures the strength of the relationship between the modelled independent variable and commitment. The obtained statistic is below average and thus small implies that it has a low predictive power. Scholars like Frost (2019) however support the argument that a low r-square is commonplace in behavioural studies where it is hard to model all variables affecting the dependent variables. The low predictive potential still provides robust and realistic ground for making conclusions especially, given that the independent variable (human capital development) was statistically significant.

## 5. Discussion of results from an empirical, and theoretical perspective

The results established that human capital development has a positive and significant effect on employee commitment. Although the overall predictive potential of the model was small ( $R^2 = 0.17$ ), grounded on the basis that such instances are common and expected in behavioural studies (Frost, 2019), it is inferred that the findings provide a reliable basis for taking management action. In this case, the action will be to promote human capital development as a conduit for commitment. The result, in particular, suggests that when organisations enhance the education of their human capital, teaching them both how and why they should do things, their commitment levels improves. The improvement in commitment is manifested in form of the employees enjoying their work more, increased willingness of employees to take on more varied and challenging tasks, and satisfied with the job, thus willing to stay longer with the organisation.

The above findings agree with a chain of earlier findings like Hsu *et al.* (2007) and Yunsoo and Jae (2018), who find that employment commitment is a function of human capital development. In the same spirit, Sen (1997) avers that human capital development concentrates on enhancing commitment through acquisition of relevant skill and knowledge, thereby augmenting production. Others who hold similar views include Benhabib and Spiegel (1994) and Becker (1993). While Becker (1993) and Bowles and Gintis (2002) tend to agree that education enhances worker productivity and commitment, they arrive at their findings from a study setting not reflective of the environmental factors of the conditions in a health institution setting within a developing economy like Uganda. So this study's findings are necessary in extending the generalisation of the findings obtained in earlier studies.

Further, still, a reflection of the above findings in light of the fact that most employees who leave the organisation in search of more meaningful employment are those who have attained further skills (Vanche, 2006), there is need to institute human resources policies conditions that ensure that those who have been trained become more committed to the organisation (Wan, 2007). Some of the human resource practices that are being exercised by human resource professionals include among others include providing a series of lifelong meaning full trainings, enhanced responsibilities and bonding the employee for some time before such employees are allowed to freely exist at no cost (Burton, 2012; McFarlin, 2019). There is need to execute research that depends the investigations into methods of ensuring that organisations perpetually benefit from their investments in capital development like perceived organisational support (Rhoades and Eisenberger, 2002; McFarlin, 2019; Deng, 2018).

From a theory application perspective (Becker, 1993; Sidorkin, 2007), the results also support the assertions of the human capital development theory by holding that investment in human capital development explains increases in employee commitment. However, in light of the heightening dynamism in environmental forces, it is necessary to understand and regularly examine the conditions and processes through which the established causal effect is held.

## 6. Conclusion

Amidst the ever changing human desires and actions that drive commitment, the study re-affirms the fact that human capital development is necessary for enhancing employee productivity and commitment. The research also contributes to existing knowledge by providing evidence from a hospital setting in a developing economy to support the existing literature from earlier studies carried out in other geographical settings. This is important as it enhances the ubiquitous application of the findings on human capital development on a global scene and across different sectors. The study recommends that managers ought to continue investing in human capital development. In addition, however, they must enhance the mechanisms of ensuring that the employees stay and work longer in the organisation as a way of mitigating post-human capital development costs.

Following from the above, future studies should investigate the conditions and processes through which capital development enhances commitment. Also, comprehensive studies that aggregate other drivers of commitment ought to be incorporated such that the predictive potential of the model is enhanced further. While efforts have been made in the past towards this direction, the revolving nature of human demands means that revisiting the basic assertions of existing findings on a periodic basis is necessary to guarantee continued value addition to organisations.

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