

RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN ORGANIZATIONAL SUPPORT, ORGANIZATIONAL COMMITMENT AND RETENTION: EVIDENCE FROM HIGH-POTENTIAL EMPLOYEES

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the effects of perceived organizational support on high-potential employees' intention to stay with their organization in the short-, medium- and long-term, through the mediating effect of organizational commitment. Data derive from an online survey conducted among a sample of 221 high-potential employees working in organizations in the Centre-Val de Loire Region (France). Statistical analyses were conducted using the Macro MEDIATE developed by Hayes and Preacher (2014). In short, results revealed that the effect of organizational support on high-potential employees' intention to stay varies according to the three time points and suggest that the effect actually progresses over time.

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KEYWORDS: Organizational Support; Intent to Stay; Retention; Organizational Commitment; Human Resource Management

INTRODUCTION

The management of high-potential employees has proven to be a major concern, as organizations are increasingly faced with the risk of losing their highly qualified personnel. Attracting and retaining this specific population have become major challenges for HR managers now operating in an increasingly competitive and globalized market. According to the results of a large survey examining retention rates among U.S. organizations, approximately one-third of employees expect to leave their current employer for another job within the next year. Further, about 20 percent of employees surveyed estimated that their chances of leaving were greater than 50 percent (Bernthal & Wellins, 2001). It is evident that organizations must work to increase their value and competitiveness in order to ensure the retention of their staff. Today, value creation in firms is based largely on the development of intellectual capital (Bouchez, 2006). The notion of intellectual capital has been examined by numerous scholars (Bontis, 1998, 1999, 2003; Edvinsson and Malone, 1997; Roos et al., 1997; Lev, 2001) and is defined as the set of resources that provide the organization with competitive advantage over other firms. Some of these resources may be externally oriented (such as brands, patents and reputation) while others are intra-organizational (such as employees' strategic skills). High-potential employees constitute a key internal resource for organizations as they act as potential vectors for sustainable competitive advantage. Therefore, the ability to attract and retain exceptional talent is crucial for organizations.

The issue of effective management of high-potential employees has been studied heavily throughout the past decade. Numerous authors have highlighted the importance of this issue, ranging from Ducker (1999) who, in the early 2000s, pointed out that firms were already in a war for talent, to Vermès (2013) who

demonstrated how Nicolas Fouquet (superintendent of Finances during the reign of Louis XIV) successfully guided his close collaborators (such as his gardener André Le Nôtre or painter Charles Le Brun) to become true experts. The literature on this subject suggests that in order to encourage retention of employees in general, appropriate HR management techniques should be implemented. Accordingly, much research reveals the importance of organizational support in reducing voluntary turnover (Eisenberger et al., 2002) as well as intentions to leave (Dawley et al. 2010; Johnson & DeConinck, 2009). Further, organizational commitment has been implicated as an important variable in explaining the relationship between organizational support and its related outcomes (Price 2001; Ramamoorthy & Flood, 2004). Therefore, the purpose of the current study is to examine the effects of perceived organizational support on high-potential employees' intention to stay with their organization over time, through the mediating effect of organizational commitment. It is hoped that the results of this study will provide answers to two major questions: firstly 'what is the impact of organizational support on the retention of high-potential employees in the short, medium and long term?' and secondly, 'does organizational commitment act as a mediating variable between organizational support and retention?'

The contributions of this study are twofold. Firstly, this article brings to light important relationships among three key HR management variables (organizational support, organizational commitment, and intention to stay) by focusing on the experience of a population currently neglected in the research literature, namely high-potential employees. The size of the sample as well as the use of numerous demographic, activity, organizational and work attributes can help inform HR managers as to the best practices to adopt with regard to these strategic employees. The second contribution is the use of a temporal approach in examining the progressive effects of perceived organizational support on the intention to stay over time. More specifically, this article explores high-potential employees' intention to stay with their organization for 6 months, 1 year and 2 years, which represent the time points of short, medium and long, respectively.

This paper is organized as follows. In the first section of the paper, a literature review is presented in which the concept of retention is defined and a description of its antecedents is offered. Further, the notion of high-potential is reviewed through the lens of social exchange theory in order to describe the subtle relations of exchange between high-potential employees and the organization, with a particular emphasis on employees' expectations regarding organizational support. The concept of organizational commitment is also reviewed as research suggests that this variable fosters the intention to stay. The literature review presented herein is essentially based on a review of key meta-analytic studies examining organizational support, commitment and retention. This strategy provides a highly exhaustive synthesis of the writings and general conclusions regarding these notions. The literature review is then followed by a presentation of the proposed research model as well as the study hypotheses. Next, the data collection strategy and methodology used in the study are presented. The article concludes with the results and conclusion sections.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In accordance with the literature on the subject, this section begins by defining the concept of retention and presenting its antecedents. The notions of high potential and social exchange within the organization are then outlined. Finally, the concepts of organizational support and organizational commitment with their respective antecedents are presented.

Retention and Its Antecedents

Retention refers to an employee's intention and/or decision to stay with his/her current employer (Cotton and Tuttle, 1986). Most studies focusing on this question have conceptualized this notion in terms of turnover rather than retention. Morin and Renaud (2009) identified numerous terms (e.g. job leaving, intention to leave, turnover) used in reference to the concept of retention. Moreover, they noted that studies tend to measure job leaving rather than employee retention, and questioned the idea that retention is the

conceptual contrary of turnover. Accordingly, turnover can be characterized as involuntary (e.g. illness, retirement) or voluntary (in which case, it can be beneficial or harmful). Retention practices are useful only if they aim to retain high-performing employees who might otherwise decide to leave the organization. Retention thus reflects the efforts made by the organization to minimize the risks of undesirable voluntary job leaving. This article cites major empirical studies on the relationships between organizational practices and retention. The ultimate aim is to clarify the role of a variety of organizational practices in order to highlight HR interventions that help foster retention. To address this issue, which is complex to decipher, numerous models have been put forward delineating a wide range of explanatory variables. These models, however, tend to measure the mere presence of these variables rather than their intensity and often overlook their combined effects on retention.

In their meta-analysis, Cotton and Tuttle (1986) studied 26 variables in relation to turnover and demonstrated that almost all the variables were indeed associated with turnover. They also revealed that population, nationality and industry moderate relationships between many explanatory variables and turnover. The external variables used were the following: Employment perceptions (+), Unemployment rate (-), Accession rate (+), and Union presence (-). The internal variables included: Pay (-), Job performance (-), Role clarity (-), Task repetitiveness (+), Overall job satisfaction (-), Satisfaction with pay (-), Satisfaction with work itself (-), Satisfaction with supervision (-), Satisfaction with co-workers (-), Satisfaction with promotional opportunities (-), and Organizational commitment (-). The personal characteristics used were: Age (-), Tenure (-), Gender (Women +), Biographical information 0, Education (+), Marital status (married -), Number of dependents (-), Aptitude and ability 0, Intelligence (+), Behavioral intentions (+), and Met expectations (-). The results of this meta-analysis were consistent with many of the conclusions found in previous studies. Accordingly, age, tenure, pay, overall job satisfaction and employment perceptions were strongly correlated with turnover. Task repetitiveness, accession rate and intelligence showed weak to no relationships with turnover. Moreover, it should be noted that employee category moderated the relationship between turnover and pay, turnover and job satisfaction as well as turnover and gender. The authors suggested that employee category has a significant impact on turnover and that studies on turnover would gain by including this criterion in their analyses.

In their meta-analysis of explanatory factors for turnover, Griffeth, Hom and Gaertner (2000) showed that job satisfaction, organizational commitment, job search, comparison of alternatives, and quit intentions accounted for withdrawal. The authors reported small to moderate predictive effects of characteristics of the work environment, job content, stress, work group cohesion, autonomy, leadership and, to a lesser extent, distributive justice and promotional chances. They also identified external explanatory factors such as alternative job opportunities. Few demographic attributes significantly accounted for turnover (except for number of children). Lastly, they emphasized the importance of merit-based reward systems for retaining high-potential employees.

Price (2001) put forward a model of turnover that included intention to stay (characterized as an antecedent). His model contained three groups of exogenous variables: individual, organizational and environmental variables. Moreover, his model highlighted the mediating effect of organizational commitment. The individual variables represented individual qualities: skills, level of job involvement and degree of positivism. While the first quality influenced turnover only, the other two qualities influenced intention to stay. The organizational variables described HR practices and internal managerial style. The author distinguished seven variables: autonomy, distributive and procedural justice, routinization, job stress, pay and retribution, organizational support, and promotional chances. These practices influenced intention to stay through a mediating relationship with job satisfaction and organizational commitment. Thus, organizational commitment acted as a mediating variable. The environmental variables were: similar job opportunities offered on the labour market and relatively strong social ties which could retain an employee who has a vague desire to leave. While social ties only affected turnover, market opportunities influenced both satisfaction and turnover.

In a meta-analysis of 25 studies with a focus on the social services sector, Mor Barak, Nissly and Levin (2001) examined the determinants of retention and investigated the factors behind employees' commitment to the organization. They found that the most significant explanatory variables for intention to leave were organizational commitment, professional commitment, burnout and job satisfaction. In the category of demographic data, age (being young), lack of work experience and lack of competence were statistically significant factors for both intention to leave and turnover. However, neither gender nor family situation was correlated with intention to leave or turnover.

As these authors pointed out, these findings can be considered as both bad and good news for managers. The bad news is that employees working in the social services tend to leave because they are not satisfied with their jobs, feel excessive stress and burnout, and do not feel supported by their supervisors and the organization. The good news is that when the decision to leave is based on working conditions and organizational culture, managers may be able to find solutions to these issues. Managers might thus benefit from periodic monitoring of their employees' feelings of job satisfaction and organizational commitment. Two studies cited by Mor Barak et al. (2001) have demonstrated that actions can be taken to reverse burnout and feelings of dissatisfaction among employees who are contemplating leaving (Cooley and Yovanoff 1996; Winefield, Fermier and Denson 1998). Lastly, it should be pointed out that the meta-analyses of Cotton and Tuttle (1986), Mor Barak et al. (2001) and Griffeth et al. (2000) did not take into account the relationship between perceived organizational support and employee turnover.

Notions of High Potential and Social Exchange with the Organization

In firms, the term "high-potential employees" refers to individuals who are identified or selected to participate in specific training programs or follow, in a formal or informal manner, accelerated career tracks in order to prepare them to replace managers, senior managers in key positions, or leaders of the organization (McCall, 1998, Walker, 1998). Viewed from outside, the high-potential employee is someone who has risen through the ranks to take on a senior position more rapidly than others. However, McCall et al. (1988) maintain that although qualities and talent play a role in the rise of high flyers, it is their ability and passion for learning that set them apart. Rault and Sartori (1991) define potential as the combination of two components: 1) a set of potential capacities based on existing aptitudes that have not yet been translated into real capacities through training or practice; and 2) a set of potential skills that have not yet been revealed in the current work situation but are known to exist because of capacities that have been exercised in other specific situations.

A high-potential employee is someone who has a greater capacity to learn and do so at a more rapid rate than others (Hugues and Hernez-Broome, 2004). Accumulating learning experiences allows these high-potential employees to acquire the skills needed for positions at the highest levels of the hierarchy. This experience presents opportunities for developing potential by facilitating the acquisition of theoretical knowledge (e.g. through training, reading, professional contacts, and exchanges and debates). Other types of experiences facilitate the acquisition of know-how, methods and practices (e.g. projects completed, experience in a position, exceptional work situations, innovation). Still other types of experiences foster the acquisition of relational or interpersonal skills (e.g. position of responsibility, public speaking, team facilitating, group decision making, and acting in an emergency or a stressful or conflict situation). A "high-potential manager", therefore, can be considered as a resource person who has the capacity to draw many lessons from his/her experience and remains open to training and learning. There is, however, always a gamble when predicting the future success of a high-potential employee. Current achievements are not a guarantee of the capacity to perform more complex tasks later on or, in particular, to obtain a leadership position. Among HR managers, high-potential managers are those expected to hold the highest future value for an organization, as they constitute an important part of the firm's intangible intellectual capital. As previously mentioned, it is crucial for firms to develop this type of capital seeing as the need for intellectual capital is increasing in the world of work. Included among high-potential managers are experts, individuals

who possess rare knowledge and display the highest competence and reputation level (Abraham et al., 2013). For Ulrich (1998), intellectual capital results from a combination of commitment (or involvement) and competence. Yet, commitment and competence depend, not only on the employees' state of mind and the way they work, but also on the way the firm operates and manages its employees to obtain results (growth). Thus, it is in part the appropriate HRM techniques that condition the emergence and development of high-potential employees.

Recent surveys conducted among HR managers (Abraham et al., 2013) reveal that high-potential employees bring value to an organization in two ways. Firstly, these employees bring intrinsic value, which reflects their possession of rare knowledge becoming actualized through their experience. Secondly, high-potential employees bring contributive value, which reflects their contribution to the organization. The intrinsic qualities of high-potential employees encompass four characteristics: scarcity in the market and thus being difficult to replace, specific knowledge, significant experience and a strong reputation. The contributive value of high-potential employees is also evident through four characteristics: always being ready and prepared, the capacity to innovate, pedagogical and knowledge transfer skills, and the value added they bring. However, as indicated by Renaud et al. (2015), these employees' contributive value is never absolute. It depends largely on how they are managed by the firm, which highlights the importance of managerial style and HR policy. Their contributive value is nevertheless conditioned by their degree of involvement, sense of belonging and/or psychological ties to the firm. Thus, their value remains subject to the risk of their leaving or of psychological resignation on their part. According to these authors, the organization must ensure that the social exchange process is solidified (Homans, 1958; Blau, 1964) so as to thwart the volatility of high-potential employees and their more frequent intention to leave.

While economic exchange theory views high-potential employees and their organization as being part of a dynamic prescribed by the external market, social exchange theory views them as fitting into the overall dynamic within the firm. Social exchange has two main dimensions: the expectation of return and mutual trust between the two parties. Social exchange is based on the norm of reciprocity (Gouldner, 1960). It relies on an expectation of return and mutual trust between two parties. Each party expects immediate and deferred contributions from the other party. In the case of high-potential employees, it suggests that an organization that treats this employee population well, will create a desire on the part of the employees to reciprocate, which will be evidenced through higher commitment to the organization and, consequently, higher retention (Eisenberger et al., 2001). Furthermore, social exchange is based on a set of social rules whereby mutual gain goes well beyond the simple economic exchange of "effort for wages." Thus, on the one hand, the organization seeks to retain high-potential employees because they represent human capital from which a return on investment is expected. If this expectation is not fulfilled, the organization may reduce its retention efforts. On the other hand, high-potential employees show commitment to invest in the organization (job motivation, reliability, loyalty) because they expect immediate or deferred monetary recognition and non-monetary recognition in return. If their expectations are not fulfilled, they may reduce their commitment by looking for similar jobs outside the firm or decreasing their job involvement (psychological disinvestment).

Specifically, the organization must strike an important balance in the management of high potential employees. Organizations must be able to enhance the intrinsic and contributive value of their employees, all while implementing practices that will increase the probability of retention. According to social exchange theory, these practices must function to ensure satisfaction of financial remuneration, encourage personal commitment and improve the perception of organizational support. In every organization, the actors participate in the building of subtle relations of exchange involving the contributions/remuneration (immediate and deferred) expected by each party. The relationship between employees and their organization begins as an economic exchange. Within a short period of time after having entered into an organization, high-potential employees will assess whether they are receiving sufficient monetary benefits to warrant making efforts and staying with the organization. Social exchange theory specifies that in the

long run the exchange relation will come to include, not only economic aspects but also trust, recognition, and support. This broader transaction allows high-potential employees to envisage long-lasting relations with their organization.

Organizational Support

Perceived organizational support plays an important role in the social exchange theoretical framework. It describes the employees' perception of the extent to which their organization recognizes their efforts, values their personal investment and contributes to their professional well-being through human resource practices that promote quality of their work environment (Eisenberger et al., 1990; Eisenberger et al., 2002). Eisenberger et al. (1986) were the first to underscore the importance of organizational support, as perceived by employees, in terms of having an impact on the latter's own organizational commitment. According to these authors, the greater the extent to which employees perceive their organization considers their expectations, the greater the effort they will invest. From the social exchange perspective, the organization derives significant benefits when employees are engaged in a reciprocity process. In their meta-analysis of 70 studies, Rhoades and Eisenberger (2002) reported a negative relationship between perceived organizational support and workers' intention to leave. Moreover, they noted that employees derive greater satisfaction from their jobs and are in a better mood at work when they perceive the presence of a relationship of reciprocity. In return, the organization benefits from stronger affective commitment, higher performance levels and lower rates of voluntary job leaving. Organizational support leads employees to experience a sense of belonging, trust and commitment to the firm. Employees who feel supported thus appear to stay longer with their organization because they feel the obligation to do so. In other words, perceived organizational support increases employee retention. Some subsequent studies have also demonstrated that perceived organizational support is negatively correlated with intention to leave (Dawley et al. 2010; Johnson and DeConinck, 2009) and employee turnover (Eisenberger et al., 2002). In sum, there is a consensus in the literature supporting a positive relationship between perceived organizational support and intention to stay.

Organizational Commitment and Its Antecedents

The concept of Organizational Commitment (OC), studied in organizational psychology for over thirty years (Morrow, 1983, Reichers, 1985, Steers 1977), is defined as an individual's (employee's) attachment to his/her organization. Studies have sought to bring out the individual and/or organizational determinants of organizational commitment (demographic variables, perceived organizational justice) in order to be in a better position to predict workplace behaviors (performance, absenteeism, intention to stay or leave the organization). According to Morrow (1983), there are several dimensions to the concept of commitment. Commitment can be related to values or ethics, referred to as values-based commitment. Alternatively, commitment can be conceptualized in accordance to work, career, a trade union or one's own organization. Morrow (1983) and Reichers (1985) emphasize the importance of specifying the precise connotation of commitment by asking the question, 'committed to what?'. The concept of organizational commitment is thus only one type of commitment among others.

Commitment is expressed as an employee's attachment or link to the organization. There are several types of organizational commitment, including attitudinal OC (by far the most documented) calculated OC and normative OC (Mowday et al., 1979). The tridimensional model of organizational commitment developed by Meyer and Allen (1991, 1997) and Allen and Meyer (1990) also distinguishes three components: affective commitment (AC), normative commitment (NC) and continuance commitment (CC). Affective commitment refers to the employees' emotional attachment to or identification with the organization. Normative commitment refers to employees' personal loyalty and moral obligations towards the organization (Allen and Meyer, 1996). Finally, Continuance commitment refers to the costs, as perceived by employees, associated with the possibility of leaving the organization. These costs can, for example,

involve pay, benefits and retirement capital – factors that may help retain employees within the organization. The current study investigated only one form of organizational commitment, namely affective commitment. According to the many studies and meta-analyses on the subject, affective commitment is most often associated with turnover and intention to stay with or leave the organization. In fact, a meta-analysis by Mathieu and Zajac's (1990) revealed that organizational commitment is predictive of a group of variables related to "job performance", including, intention to leave, intention to search, and perception of alternative jobs (p. 174). Furthermore, Meyer et al.'s (2002) meta-analysis, which adopted the tridimensional model of organizational commitment devised by Meyer and Allen (1991,1997) and Allen and Meyer (1990), demonstrated that the three forms of OC positively affect intention to stay and negatively affect actual turnover. The results of this meta-analysis revealed that affective commitment had the greatest effect on intention to stay, hence, the methodological choice for the current study.

In their meta-analysis, Meyer et al. (2002) went a step further by proposing a model, integrating the three dimensions of commitment. Specifically, the model included the AC, NC and CC components, their antecedents and three groups of outcome variables. The outcome variables included employer relevant outcomes such as turnover and/or intention to leave and workplace behaviors (presence, involvement, performance), as well as employee level outcomes such as health and well-being at work. Their findings revealed that the AC, CC and NC dimensions were all negatively correlated with turnover and intention to leave. Affective commitment (followed by NC) was the most strongly and positively associated with outcomes for the employer as well as the employee. The CC dimension did not have an impact on these outcomes. An examination of the consequences of commitment revealed that all three forms of commitment were negatively correlated with turnover and intention to leave, but that this was especially true for affective commitment. This study was particularly relevant in that it showed that affective commitment has positive effects not only for the organization but also for employees as it is strongly correlated with occupational health, well-being and work-life balance (negatively correlated with stress and work-life conflict).

Many studies have shown that affective commitment is an important predictor of intention to stay (Ramamoorthy and Flood, 2002). Specifically, Ramamoorthy and Flood's (2004) study on gender and employee attitudes tested whether two forms of commitment (affective and normative) mediated the relationships between perceived distributive and procedural justice and intention to stay. They hypothesized that positive relationships exist between distributive justice and procedural justice on the one hand and affective commitment and intention to stay on the other. Their results showed that affective commitment was strongly correlated with intention to stay and that the two forms of commitment were also strongly correlated. They found that the impact of perceived justice on intention to stay was indirectly explained by the mediation of the "affective commitment" variable. Their study also revealed that one of the components of procedural justice – perception of standard reinforcement – strongly influenced affective commitment but not normative commitment. This explains why Meyer et al. (2002) proposed that affective commitment and normative commitment have distinct antecedents. Similarly, Poon (2012) examined how distributive justice and procedural justice interact to predict intention to leave the organization through the moderating and mediating effect affective commitment. Her study involving 168 employees showed that affective commitment mediated the relationship between distributive justice and intention to leave and that the mediating effect varied according to the level of procedural justice.

Based on the research literature as well as social exchange theory, we tested two hypotheses using this model.

Hypothesis 1: Perceived organizational support increases high-potential employees' intention to stay over the long term.

Hypothesis 2: Affective commitment acts as a mediating variable between perceived organizational support and intention to stay.

Model and Hypotheses

The model of analysis used for our research is presented in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Model of Analysis

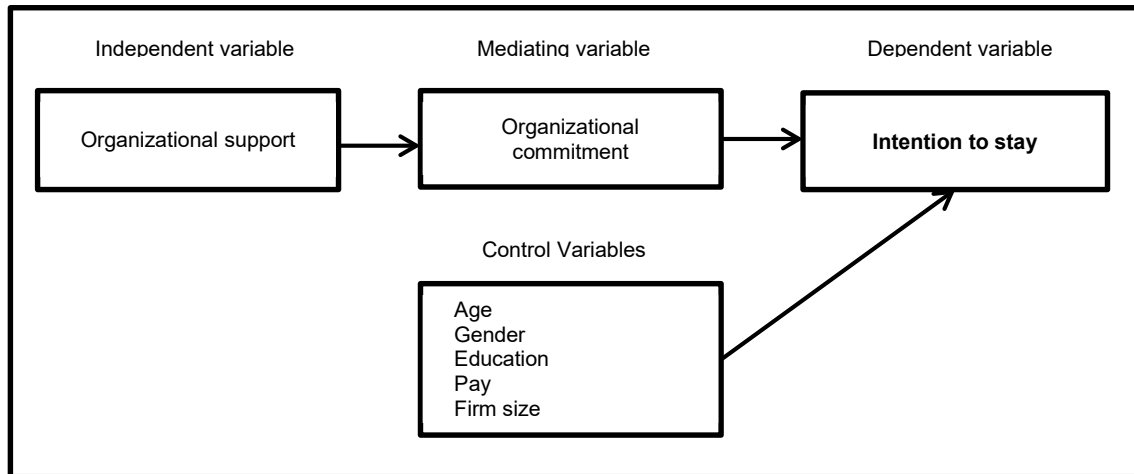


Figure 1 presents the model of analysis. This model postulates that organizational support increases intention to stay through its effect on organizational commitment.

DATA AND METHODOLOGY

Data for this study come from a survey conducted among a sample of high-potential employees working in organizations in the Centre-Val de Loire Region, France. The population under study was composed of graduates from both the ‘Ecole Supérieure de Commerce et de Management de Tours’ (ESCEM, School of Business and Management) as well as the ‘Institut d’Administration des Entreprises de Tours’ (IAE, Institute of Business Administration). Participants consisted of high-potential employees, as identified by their firm, who had graduated more than five years earlier and were now working in firms located in the region. Respondents were contacted by e-mail and their participation was voluntary. Data were collected through the use of an online questionnaire, completed via the secured (Web-based) platform LimeSurvey. The data collection took place between November 2014 and January 2015. In total, 520 high-potential employees were invited to participate in the study. Of these 520 high-potential employees, 221 questionnaires were exploitable, representing a 43% response rate.

The high-potential employees’ intention to stay over the short, medium and long term was measured using the Staying or Leaving Index, an instrument developed by Bluedorn (1982). In the questionnaire, participants were asked to answer the following question: “If it were entirely up to you, what is the probability that you would stay with your current employer?” on a scale of 0 to 100, where 0 indicated almost nil probability and 100 an extremely high probability. This way of measuring intention to stay on a continuous scale is frequently used in empirical studies focusing on developing workforce loyalty. In this study, intention to stay over the short term was measured by the probability of staying for the next 6 months. Intention to stay over the medium term was measured by the probability of staying for a year. Lastly, intention to stay over the long term was measured by the probability of staying for the next 2 years.

The affective commitment index, developed by Allen and Meyer (1990), was used to measure the respondents’ level of organizational commitment. The high-potential employees were asked to indicate their level of agreement with the following six items: 1- “I feel a strong sense of belonging to my current

firm,” 2- “My current employer has a great deal of personal meaning for me,” 3- “I am proud to belong to my current firm,” 4- “I do not feel emotionally attached to my current firm,” 5- “I do not feel like part of the family at my current employer” and 6- “I really feel as if my employer’s problems are my own.” The level of agreement for each item was measured on a 7-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1- strongly disagree, 2- moderately disagree, 3- slightly disagree, 4- neither agree nor disagree, 5- slightly agree, 6- moderately agree, to 7- strongly agree. After reversing the negatively formulated answers to items 4 and 5, means were calculated for all the items, yielding a continuous scale. The internal consistency of this index was excellent (Cronbach’s $\alpha = 0.885$).

Organizational support was measured using the following 3 items: 1- “My current employer supports its employees,” 2- “My current employer provides me with the tools (material, etc.) I need to do my job”, and 3- “My current employer takes its employees’ personal needs into account.” Participants answered on a 7-point scale ranging from 1- strongly disagree, 2- moderately disagree, 3- slightly disagree, 4- neither agree nor disagree, 5- slightly agree, 6- moderately agree, to 7- strongly agree. Means were calculated for the 3 items to obtain a continuous variable. The Cronbach’s alpha for the organizational support variable indicated that its measurement scale had strong internal consistency (Cronbach’s $\alpha = 0.834$).

Five control variables, as identified in the literature, were measured to isolate the impact of organizational support on the high-potential employees’ intention to stay. The control variables were age, gender, education, pay and firm size. The Age variable was measured on a continuous scale and was based on the respondent’s year of birth. Gender was measured as a dichotomous variable coded as 1 if the respondent was female and 0 if the respondent was male. Education was measured as a dichotomous variable coded as 1 if the respondent held a Master’s degree (Master1) or higher and 0 otherwise. The Pay variable indicated the respondent’s gross annual pay and was measured using an ordinal scale where 1- corresponded to less than 30,000 Euros, 2- 30,000 to less than 45,000 Euros, 3- 45,000 to less than 60,000 Euros, 4- 60,000 to less than 75,000 Euros, 5- 75,000 to less than 90,000 Euros, 6- 90,000 to less than 105,000 Euros, 7- 105,000 to less than 120,000 Euros, and 8 – 120,000 Euros or more. Firm Size was measured using an ordinal scale where 1- indicated fewer than 20 employees, 2- 20 to less than 100 employees, 3- 100 to less than 200 employees, 4- 200 to less than 500 employees, and 5- 500 employees or more. Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics for all variables under study.

The results presented in Table 1 indicate that the high-potential employees’ intention to stay with their current employer over the short term was very high ($\mu=84.05$) but that their intention to stay over the medium term was lower ($\mu=71.76$) and their intention to stay over the long term was much lower still ($\mu=57.42$). The mean for organizational commitment reveals that the respondents “slightly” agreed with the different items associated with a high level of commitment. In other words, the high-potential employees, on average, ($\mu=4.74$), showed a moderate level of organizational commitment (4.74 out of 7 = 67.71%). The mean of organizational support ($\mu=4.46$) reveals that the respondents were somewhere between “slightly” agreeing and “moderately” agreeing with all the items. Thus, it appears that, on average, the participants considered that the firm supported them adequately. As shown in Table 1, the participants were, on average, slightly older than 39 years of age ($\mu=39.42$) and 46% of them were female ($\mu=0.46$). Among the participants, 93% held a post-graduate degree ($\mu=0.93$). The mean of the respondents’ gross annual pay was between 45,000 and 60,000 Euros ($\mu=2.89$). Lastly, the high-potential employees participating in this study tended to work in large firms with, on average, between 200 and 500 employees ($\mu=4.04$).

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics

	Mean	SD	Minimum	Maximum	N
Dependent variables					
Intention to stay short term	84.05	27.47	0	100	221
Intention to stay medium term	71.76	32.42	0	100	221
Intention to stay long term	57.42	35.56	0	100	221
Mediating variable					
Organizational commitment	4.74	1.40	1	7	221
Independent variable					
Organizational support	4.46	1.50	1	6	221
Control variables					
Age	39.42	9.23	22	62	221
Female	0.46	0.50	0	1	221
Education	0.93	0.25	0	1	221
Pay	2.89	1.34	1	8	221
Firm size	4.04	1.36	1	5	221

Table 1 provides descriptives statistics for the dependent, mediating, independent and control variables used in the estimation. Results indicate that intention to stay over the short term was very high ($\mu=84.05$). Intention to stay over the medium term was lower ($\mu=71.76$) and intention to stay over the long term was much lower still ($\mu=57.42$).

RESULTS

Table 2 presents the results of the regression analyses performed on the high-potential employees' intention to stay. The regressions were conducted with SPSS software version 21 using the MEDIATE Macro suggested by Hayes and Preacher (2014). This macro is based on the method of least squares. It was used to measure the total effects as well as the direct and indirect relationships between variables. It also considered the mediating effect of affective commitment and the impact of the control variables. Thus, the analyses tested whether affective commitment acted as a mediating variable between organizational support and intention to stay. The MEDIATE Macro gave the results of two regressions: the first on affective commitment and the second on intention to stay. For total mediation to be present, two conditions must be met. First, organizational support must be statistically related to affective commitment. Second, organizational support must reveal no statistical association with intention to stay, when regressed with affective commitment. Moreover, Hayes and Preacher's MEDIATE Macro (2014) proposes a direct test of the mediation effect based on a bootstrap interval. If this interval includes zero, the mediation effect is not significant. If only the first condition is met and the bootstrap interval does not include zero, the mediation effect is considered to be partial. Table 2 reports the results of the regressions obtained by using the MEDIATE Macro with intention to stay over the short term, then intention to stay over the medium term and, lastly, intention to stay over the long term.

First, regarding the regression results for intention to stay over the short term, organizational support and the control variables were first regressed on organizational commitment. The results presented in Table 2 indicate that organizational support had a positive impact on organizational commitment ($b=0.686$; $p<0.01$). This finding suggests that when high-potential employees perceived strong organizational support, their commitment to the organization increased. Organizational commitment, organizational support and the control variables were then regressed on intention to stay over the short term. Organizational support had no significant impact on intention to stay over the short term ($b=2.050$; $p>0.05$) whereas commitment had a positive but only marginally significant effect ($b=4.016$; $p<0.05$) on intention to stay over the short term. These results indicate that organizational support had no direct impact on the high-potential employees' intention to stay over the short term. Moreover, the bootstrap confidence interval included 0, thus

invalidating the mediating role of commitment in the relationship between organizational support and the high-potential employees’ intention to stay over the short term (CI=-0.196 to 6.225). Taken together, the above results indicate that organizational support had no direct effect on the high-potential employees’ intention to stay over the short term and no indirect effect on their intention to stay over the short term through organizational commitment. Organizational support appears to have contributed only to increasing the high-potential employees’ organizational commitment; however, this effect subsequently had no indirect influence on their intention to stay over the short term.

Table 2: Regressions on High-Potential Employees’ Intention to Stay (Non-Standardized Coefficients)

	Intention to Stay Short Term (6 Months)		Intention to Stay Medium Term (1 Year)		Intention to Stay Long Term (2 Years)	
	Org. Com.	Int. stay	Org. Com.	Int. stay	Org. Com.	Int. stay
Control variables						
Age	0.002	-0.081	0.002	0.311	0.002	0.463
Female	-0.076	3.668	-0.076	7.209	-0.076	7.536
Education	0.213	-7.426	0.213	3.456	0.213	3.186
Pay	-0.039	0.018	-0.039	1.094	-0.039	1.701
Firm size	0.079	1.747	0.079	0.617	0.079	0.068
Consistency	1.216 *	57.188 **	1.216 *	-1.794	1.216 *	-36.302 *
Mediating variable						
Organizational commitment		4.016 *		7.054 **		9.464 **
Independent variable indépendante						
Organizational support	0.686 **	2.050	0.686 **	3.506	0.686 **	4.248 *
R ² (adjusted)	0.538 **	0.082 **	0.538 **	0.175 **	0.538 **	0.255 **
N	221	221	221	221	221	221
Indirect Effect of Organizational Support Through Commitment						
Bootstrap Confidence Interval	-0.196 to 6.229		1.459 to 8.124		2.961 to 10.193	

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$. Table 2 shows the regression estimates for high-potential employees’ intention to stay. The first two columns indicate that organizational support increases indirectly intention to stay over the short and medium terms through organizational commitment. The third column shows that organizational support increase directly and indirectly intention to stay over the long term.

Second, regarding the regression results for intention to stay over the medium term, organizational support was first regressed on organizational commitment with the control variables. Organizational support positively and significantly influenced the high-potential employees’ organizational commitment ($b=0.686$; $p<0.01$). This finding indicates that greater support contributed to increasing the high-potential employees’ commitment to their firm. Organizational support and commitment were then regressed on intention to stay over the medium term with the control variables. The results presented in Table 2 indicate that organizational support had no significant impact on the high-potential employees’ intention to stay over the medium term ($b=3.506$; $p>0.05$) whereas organizational commitment positively and significantly influenced the high-potential employees’ intention to stay over the medium term ($b=7.054$; $p<0.01$). The bootstrap confidence interval did not include 0, thus confirming the mediating role of organizational commitment in the relationship between organizational support and the high-potential employees’ intention to stay over the medium term (CI=1.459 to 8.124). Consequently, organizational support had no direct impact on the high-potential employees’ intention to stay over the medium term. However, an indirect relationship existed through organizational commitment. Organizational support appears to have positively but indirectly influenced the high-potential employees’ intention to stay over the medium term through the mediating effect of organizational commitment. Organizational support increased the level of commitment

and the latter, in turn, contributed to increasing the high-potential employees' intention to stay with their firm over the medium term.

Lastly, regarding the regression results for intention to stay over the long term, organizational support and the control variables were first regressed on organizational commitment. The results indicate that organizational support had a positive and significant impact on the high-potential employees' organizational commitment ($b=0.686$; $p < 0.01$). All of these variables were then regressed on intention to stay over the long term. The results presented in Table 2 show not only that organizational commitment had a positive and significant effect on intention to stay over the long term ($b=9.464$; $p < 0.01$) but also that organizational support had a positive and significant impact on the high-potential employees' intention to stay over the long term ($b=4.248$; $p < 0.05$). The bootstrap confidence interval did not include 0, thus confirming the mediating role of organizational commitment in the relationship between organizational support and the high-potential employees' intention to stay over the long term (CI=2.961 to 10.193). However, since the relationship between organizational support and intention to stay over the long term was significant, it must be concluded that commitment played only a partial mediating role. The results thus indicate that organizational support directly influenced the high-potential employees' intention to stay over the long term and also indirectly influenced their intention to stay over the long term by contributing to increasing their organizational commitment.

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

The primary purpose of this study was to uncover the impact of organizational support on the retention of high-potential employees over the short, medium and long term and to determine the extent to which organizational commitment mediates this relationship. In order to test the hypotheses under study, a sample of high-potential employees, working in the Centre-Val de Loire Region in France were invited to complete an online questionnaire assessing their intention to remain with the organization for 6, 12, and/or 24 months, their perceived organizational support, as well as their organizational commitment levels. The results revealed that the effects of organizational support on intention to stay vary across the three time points assessed in this study. More importantly, the results suggest that the effect of organizational support on intention to stay seem to become stronger over time. Furthermore, results revealed that organizational support was positively and significantly associated with organizational commitment at all time points. Additionally, organizational commitment fully mediated the relationship between organizational support and intention to stay with the organizations for a 1-year period (medium term). Organizational commitment partially mediated the relationship between organizational support and intention to stay with the organization for a 2-year period (long term), whereas no mediation effect was found for intention to stay for a 6-month period (short term).

A unique contribution of the current study is that organizational support displayed a temporal effect on intention to stay. Specifically, organizational support was found to play a crucial role in affecting employees' decision to stay over the long term. This temporal approach is useful as it demonstrates that there is a timeframe after which employees become acutely aware of the support offered by their organization. After this period, managerial practices that offer support must be made clearly apparent to high-potential employees and must provide them with the necessary means to perform their tasks and satisfy their personal needs. Clearly, the results of this study highlight the utility of including temporal analyses in future studies examining the effects of organizational support on retention.

Consistent with previous research, the results of this study also revealed that organizational commitment plays an important role in mediating the relationship between organizational support and intention to stay. Over the short term (6 months), organizational support had no direct effect, or even indirect effect, on retention. In other words, high-potential employees appear to tolerate or even accept a lack of organizational support for a short period, and this does not appear to affect their commitment or intention to stay. Over the

medium term (1 year), organizational support had an indirect effect on retention since it increased organizational commitment, which, in turn, fostered the intention to stay. Over the long term (2 years), organizational support not only had a direct effect on intention to stay but also had a direct effect on organizational commitment, which, in turn, had an effect on intention to stay. The retention of high-potential employees is thus strengthened over time through organizational commitment.

Taken together, the results of this study are in line with the propositions of social exchange theory. More precisely, the conclusions of this study indicate that in the social exchange that is established between high-potential employees and their organization, the contributive value of high-potential employees depends on their degree of involvement. The organization must gradually reinforce the social exchange in order to foster retention. In this deferred exchange transaction, perceived organizational support leads to commitment (understood as affective commitment) on the part of high-potential employees. The findings of this study also have practical implications for employers looking to ensure the retention of high-potential employees. Based on the results, it is recommended that HR decision-makers in the Centre-Val de Loire Region implement practices encouraging organizational support since this study clearly demonstrates that high-potential employees in this region currently exhibit a fairly low intention to stay for 2 years (only 57%). In the least captive labor pools and when retaining high-potential employees is a strategic challenge for management, the recommendation to invest in strong organizational support is a guarantee of sustainability for organizations.

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