

**CHANGING AND CHALLENGING
ASPECTS OF COMMITMENT IN
THE CONTRACT WORKFORCE**

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Abstract

This paper examines the notion of work commitment within the professional contractor workforce - a working relationship that typifies the growing number falling outside that of the traditional and ongoing employer/employee relationship. In particular, attention is given to the commitment-related implications associated with the contracting relationship where both an employing organization and a Contracting Agency (CA) are involved as both have a vested interest in managing the contractor within this construct. A specific focus of this research is the ability of a contractor to hold dual commitment and to investigate the factors that influence commitment to each party. The limited nature of data available within Australia means this study is supplemented with the much larger body of data and research from the United States. Implications from the findings of this study for human resource management practices in both Contracting Agencies and host organisations as well as future research needs are discussed.

CHANGING AND CHALLENGING ASPECTS OF COMMITMENT IN THE CONTRACT WORKFORCE

INTRODUCTION

One of the most striking features of the changing world of work is the increasing number of workers falling outside of the traditional view of a worker as a male in a full-time, stable job of indefinite duration (Campbell and Burgess 1993; Collins 1990). While non-standard arrangements constitute the fastest growing workforce within the industrialized world, Australia stands out amongst OECD nations as second only to Spain in its use of such labor (ABS, 1998; Long, 1998). Surprisingly then, while the move to professional contract arrangements have been identified as a particularly significant area of growth within non-standard work (Belous, 1989; Block 1993; Bridges 1995; Hakim 1994; Handy 1989 and 1996; Reich 1992; Rifkin 1995), Australia has virtually no data available on the this workforce. The isolated and ad hoc nature of both Australian data and investigation lends itself to a comparative focus - in this case the wealth of US data and research on the professional contract workforce has been used to anchor and guide this research project

The privileged position of the professional within the changing world of work has been the subject of widely cited monographs both within Australia and the United States, from the 'knowledge workers' of Jones (1995) to the 'symbolic analysts' of Reich (1992). Even the advent of redundancies amongst managerial and professional levels in the organizational restructuring of the eighties and nineties and the mass movement of these groups into non-traditional work arrangements appears to have done little to challenge such comfortable assumptions. There is little written on this workforce in terms of the issues of marginalisation and uncertainty that characterise much of the research on other forms of peripheral work. Overall the fundamental assertion of much of the theoretical literature on the future of work is how suited professionals are to take advantage of it. Some even propose that the attributes that characterise such workers will, one day, become the way of the work for the majority (Handy, 1996; Herriot & Pemberton, 1995). If these writers are correct, this identifies a very important reason as to why this workforce should receive greater attention. The focus of this paper is to investigate the professional in contract employment in terms of the changing role of commitment.

COMMITMENT

The concept of commitment is a traditional area of HRM concern and "indeed, the whole rationale for introducing HRM policies is to increase levels of commitment so that other positive outcomes can ensue" (Guest, 1998:42). It is this assumption which underlies the common employer declaration that "people are our most valuable resource."

Academically the nature and role of commitment is well researched and tools such as Mowday, Porter, & Steers (1982) Organizational Commitment Questionnaire are well known. But there is also increasing interest in the view that commitment may assume a multiple focus - including that of commitment to the broader domain of an occupation, profession or career (Gallagher and Parks, forthcoming). Extending this view of commitment is also of increasing relevance to HRM practices today as past assumptions of an ongoing relationship between an employer and employee no longer holds the same validity that it once did.

While there have always been areas of the workforce who have worked on fixed or uncertain periods, the growth in this type of employment, (called by terms ranging from peripheral¹, alternative, contingent to atypical and non-standard), over the past decade suggests that it is becoming the norm rather than the exception (ABS, 2000). It is a trend that indicates a restructuring of the relationships of work between employee and employer where organisations exercise increasing discretion over the number and type of workers at any particular point in time. While the reasons for these employer strategies may range from cost

¹ This is the term which will used in the rest of this paper

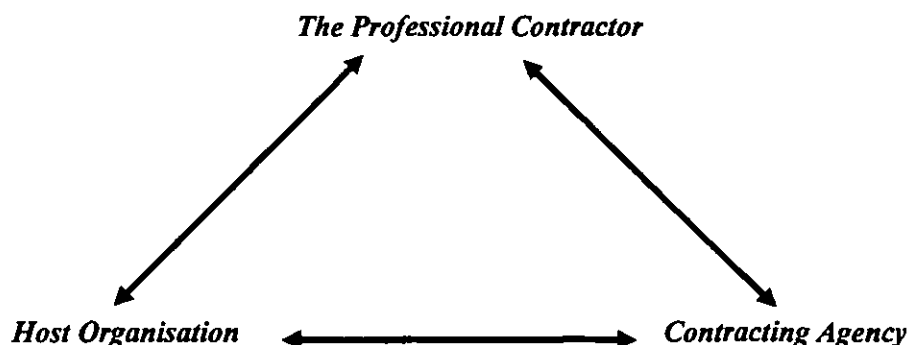
reduction to a shortage of skilled workers, the common element is the avoidance of responsibility by employers to sustain a long term and ongoing work relationship. This absence eliminates one of the fundamentals underlying organizational commitment – that of the exchange of commitment for ongoing employment security. While the impact of this change on employees has provided many areas of fruitful research, the effects on the ‘peripheral’ workforce remain relatively unknown.

Most of the literature on commitment continues to present it as synonymous with commitment to the ‘employer’ organization. However, in the contracting relationship it is unclear who holds this position (though in most cases legally in Australia, the Agency is the employer). Investigating the construct of commitment within this workforce builds on a very limited number of investigations but raises some important HR issues about the integration and management of contractors within the larger employee workforce. The organizations treatment of non-traditional workers has been shown to affect the perception and commitment of the ‘core’ workforce (Geary, 1992). Davis-Blake & Uzzi’s (1993) study based on secondary data analysis suggested that increasing the ratio of peripheral workers decreases the levels of organizational trust and commitment of core workers. A third study, Pearce (1993), supports this but also found that contractors actively participated in extra pro-social behavior in apparent attempts to ‘fit in’ with into the employing organization - possibly to obtain permanent employment. Writers on the future of work could also interpret this pro-social behaviour as supporting the view that the more socially adept opt for contracting. The fourth study of relevance advanced the notion of dual commitment to establish that contractors can hold commitment to both employing organization and Contracting Agency (CA) but that different factors were involved (Benson, 1996 & 1999).

Benson’s (1996) study in particular highlights the need to examine the factors that shape the work relationship. It is a view further supported in the recent, comprehensive study by Gallagher and McLean-Parks (2001) which systematically addresses the relationship between peripheral work and work commitment to examine the overlap, applicability and relative importance of various commitment foci such as the organisation, job, occupation and employment basis. Taken together, these five studies (four from the US and one Australian) provided the basis for an investigation of the role of commitment in the three-way relationship of the contractor, the employing organisation and the contracting agency.

Illustrated in Figure 1, the role of the contracting agency (CA) focuses the notion of dual commitment into the explicit short-term forms of peripheral work dealt with by specialized temporary employment firms within the professional sector (covering occupations such as accountants, engineers and IT workers). While there can be substantial variation in the way CAs operate, the most common method is for them to provide client organisations with suitable contractors from their register of individuals available for contract work. While contract duration tends to be limited to the completion of a particular project, it can be for set periods such as covering staff absence. The involvement of a CA complicates the relationship between employing organisation and contractor so that a contractor may have legal, contractual responsibilities to both.

Figure 1: The Working Relationships of the Agency Contractor



The three-way nature of the contracting relationships translates into a number of issues in terms of commitment:

- Firstly, the employing organisation appears to have the greatest ability to influence commitment, either in terms of creating and/or increasing it, as most work tends to be done at their location. They can thus exercise considerable control over how and when work is performed.
- However, Gallagher & McLean-Parks (forthcoming) point out that the degree to which the organizations want commitment from its contractors is not clear – even where contractors are used because of skill shortage and an inability to hire skilled, permanent workers.
- Secondly, the way in which CAs assign and manage contractors can be used to maintain contact and control - and thus to create and build commitment. The exploratory interviews that preceded this current research investigation found that the provision of training and social activities for their contractors was one such tool.
- The interviews also revealed that many knew 'their' contractors would be registered with other CAs and would have preferred to have the sole commitment. Again, the explicit provision of bonuses and in-house seminars were some of the devices used for increasing contractor commitment to them.

Overall, while many of the factors traditionally thought to shape commitment appear to be more under the control of the employing organisation than the CA. However, given the fixed and often short-term nature of assignments, it seems reasonable to suggest that contractors will become increasingly committed to the Agency that finds them ongoing and suitable employment. In line with this, Gallagher and McLean-Parks (forthcoming) suggest that commitment to an Agency will be positively correlated with both the number of client assignments the Agency has made for the worker and the length of time they have been registered with that Agency.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research builds upon an interview schedule used in Stage 1 of this research project to establish the key qualitative themes describing the professional's decision to become a contractor. Interviews in this exploratory stage were carried out with both professional contractors and with representatives from three of the major Contracting Agencies in Melbourne, Australia. The problems of definition and access to large numbers of contractors in particular were overcome in this second stage of research through utilising the services of these contracting agencies. Covering over 1,500 individuals registered for work, the three Agencies distributed 500 surveys to those individuals currently actively working on assignment with them. The results reported in this paper arise from the section of the Survey on commitment. Based on the nine item version of Porter's Organizational Commitment Questionnaire (Porter et al, 1974; Mowday et al, 1979), the Questionnaire was amended to present the nine items twice, worded once for measuring commitment to the CA and then again, to the current employing organisation. Responses were made on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from Strongly Disagree (1) to Strongly Agree (7).

The independent variables examined include age, sex, occupation, control over work, income, reasons for entering contracting as well as number of assignments and length of time contracting. The results from these were compared to the four American studies (Gallagher & McLean-Parks, forthcoming; Geary, 1992; Davis-Blake & Uzzi, 1993; Pearce, 1993) and one Australian study (Benson, 1996 & 1999) previously mentioned. Further analysis was also carried out using a tool specifically developed for the research called the Push/Pull Matrix. Illustrated in Table 1, the Matrix builds on the classic economic theories of 'career' (Knight, 1933) versus 'default' (Schumpeter, 1934) in the move into self-employment and extrapolates them into the professional contractor workforce. Based on the individual's initial decision to enter contracting, the first dimension of the Matrix is the nature of the move - whether it is by choice or not. While the voluntary/involuntary nature of this decision is explicit within most studies of self-employment, it is often treated as being of little relevance to the professional. However, a number of studies on the use of contractors in the last decade have indicated the rising employer practice of converting employees into

contractors (Casey, Metcalf et al. 1997; Creighton 1994) and the exploratory interviews with professional contractors confirmed that the practice does occur in this workforce. This provides the reason for the Default 2 option of the Matrix. The second aspect of the decision process the Matrix addresses is the timing of the move, either direct or delayed. This aspect should differentiate between individuals who make a planned career move straight into contracting and those who move due to other reasons such as caring for dependents or a return to study. It is a distinction made clear within the Default 1 and Push options illustrated in Table 1.

Table 1: The Push/Pull Matrix

	Left Prior Work Arrangement To Become a Contractor	Left Prior Work Arrangement & Later Became a Contractor
Contractor By Choice	PULL	DEFAULT1
Contractor Not by Choice	DEFAULT2	PUSH

Structuring survey responses on the issues of choice and the timing of the move into contracting provides explanations in the traditional economic language of money and advancement, as well as through the psychological and sociological notions of choice and satisfaction. These are then desegregated into items are illustrated in Table 2.

Table 2: The Push/Pull Matrix Translated into Survey Items

	Left Prior Work Arrangement To Become a Contractor	Left Prior Work Arrangement & Later Became a Contractor
Contractor by Choice	<p>PULL</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • prefer be own boss • set up own business • set up business with others • more money • always wanted to • flexible lifestyle 	<p>DEFAULT*1</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • best option available • normal in my profession • balances work & family • voluntary redundancy
Contractor Not by Choice	<p>DEFAULT*2</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • best option available • normal in my profession • balances work & family • voluntary redundancy 	<p>PUSH</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • involuntary redundancy • employer request • no/few career prospects

NB: Default *1 and *2 options share the same items at this stage

The discrepancy between the empirical literature on peripheral work and the theoretical literature on professional contractors is highlighted by the dual placement of the same items in both 'Default' quadrants. The Matrix thus offers a structured framework of the reasons professionals become contractors and uses this as the basis for investigating the employment relationship in terms of the concept of commitment.

RESULTS

Of the five hundred surveys, two hundred and forty completed questionnaires were returned. The results presented here are from Part F of what was in total, a six-part survey. Table 3 shows the breakdown of respondents by sex (178 or 74.2% males, 62 or 25.8% females), age, sex and professional occupation. While nearly 80% of respondents were from Information Technology (IT), Business/Management/administration (Bus/Man/Admin.) or Engineering, the number of female respondents was highest in Health & Welfare.

Table 3: Respondents by Age, Gender & Occupation

	AGE GROUP																		Total		
	Under 24		25 to 29		30 to 34		35 to 39		40 to 44		45 to 49		50 to 54		55 to 59		60 to 64		M	F	
	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F			
Scientist			1		3								1						5	5	
Architect/Draught/Building					2	1	7	1	6		2		6	1	1				25	3	28
Business/Manager/Admin.			3	2	2	4	6	4	3	2	3	2	14		14				47	14	61
Information Technology	1	2	15		3	2	9	5	18	2	1	1	2		4				53	12	65
Health & Welfare					1		5		3		3				5					17	17
Education							2		2		2	1		1					2	6	8
Engineer			1	2	2		4		17	3	4	2	1		4		1		34	6	40
Accountant							1		5	1	2		1		1				10	1	11
TOTALS	1	2	20	4	12	8	27	19	49	13	12	9	26	1	28	5	4		178*	2*	
TOTAL	3		24		30		46		62		31		27		33		4		*240		

*Includes data omitted from the Table due to small sample size for occupations of School Teachers, Social/Arts/Misc. & Unsure

The results presented in Table 4 reveal a clear-cut and significant difference in the two levels of commitment – notably, that commitment to the organisation is consistently higher on all aspects except that of item E7 dealing with satisfaction (about the original decision to work for the Organisation or Contracting Agency). While the overall difference between commitment to the Organisation and to the Contracting Agency is significant at the .000 level, further analysis reveals that there is a gender difference with females having slightly less difference ($p = .017$ whilst, males are .000). Translating the results back into the language of the rating scale used to measure commitment means that a score of 4 provides a neutral area of 'Neither agree nor disagree' while 5 is 'Slightly agree.'

Table 4: Commitment to Organisations & Contracting Agencies

Items	Organisation		Contracting Agency	
	Sum	Mean	Sum	Mean
E1/Work Effort	1356	5.65*	1173	4.89
E2/Public Affirmation	1161	4.84**	1064	4.43
E3/Ongoing Attachment	817	3.40*	768	3.20
E4/Shared Values	952	3.97*	894	3.73
E5/Public Affiliation	1155	4.81*	1095	4.56
E6/Work Motivation	1041	4.34*	951	3.96
E7/Satisfaction	1195	4.98	1097	4.57
E8/Personal Attachment	1217	5.07*	1101	4.59
E9/Personal Affiliation	949	3.95*	906	3.77
Average	1093	4.36*	1055.44	4.19

*Results significantly higher at the .001 level and ** at the .005 level

The results are similar to those reported in the studies of by Benson (1996) and Pearce (1993) who both used the short form of the OQC. Therefore, while the results indicate that contractors are more committed to the Organisation they are contracting for rather than the Contracting Agency they are working through, the strength of that commitment is only small. It does indicate that commitment to one party may not be at the expense of the other or perhaps, that commitment may be placed somewhere else altogether - such as to the profession.

However, applying the Matrix framework to the results produces quite a different perspective. Table 5 illustrates that those 'pushed' into contracting expressed greater commitment to the CA (mean of 3.67, $p > .005$). This result corresponds with those from Benson's (1996 & 1999) studies where he explains similar results as individuals being retrenched and grateful for the offer of contract employment. Males now dominate both Organisational and Contracting Agency commitment in the Pull, Default1, Choice and Direct Entry sectors. These sectors each produced distinct age groupings as well as revealing clear domination by some occupations.

Overall, the results indicate that the logic behind the Matrix (of timing and choice in the move) produces clear variances in terms of commitment and that commitment to one party may be at the expense of the other. This is most clearly seen in the Choice sector where Engineers express greater commitment to the client organisation whereas Architects are more committed to the Agency they contract through.

Table 5: The Push/Pull Matrix, Commitment and Demographics

	Left Prior Work Arrangement To Become a Contractor	Left Prior Work Arrangement & Later Became a Contractor	
Contractor by Choice	PULL Organisation*** $\pi= 4.8$ - 54 Males*** with 26 aged 40-44*** - 29 with no dependents*** Contract Agency - 6 males aged 35-39*** - 10 Architects***	DEFAULT1 Organisation - 6 males aged 50-59** Contract Agency - 7 males aged 40-44***	CHOICE Organisation** $\pi= 4.8$ - 93 Males* with 62 married** 8 aged 35-39*** - 58 with no dependents* - 23 Engineers*** Contract Agency*** $\pi= 4.4$ - 93 Males*** with 62 married* 12 aged 35-39*** & 10 aged 55-59*** - 11 Architects* - 8 Females aged 40-44*** - 58 with no dependents*4 with one** 36 with 2 or more*
Contractor Not by Choice	DEFAULT2	PUSH Organisation - 5 with 1 dependent***	NO CHOICE
	DIRECT ENTRY Organisation - 6 Males 30-34*** Agency - 19 Architects*** and 9 Bus/Man*** - 5 Females aged 35-39***	DELAYED ENTRY Organisation - 18 with 1 dependent*** Agency - 18 with 1 dependent**	

*Results significant at the .001 level ** .005 and ***.05

The interviews which underpin the earlier stage of research identified a 'professional norm' of contracting in these two professions and, in the words of one of the engineers interviewed:

Once you've been around a while your reputation spreads and you always have the next job waiting for you. You don't have to go looking, they come to you. (PC4)

Knowledge of labour demand appears to play a role in the direction and strength of commitment to the parties involved in the contracting relationship. The presence of dependent children also reveals some interesting results in this sector as their lack produces a dual commitment to both parties whereas their presence results in a greater commitment to the Contracting Agency. Previous results linking lifestyle and flexibility, as key reasons for entering contracting are possible explanations. These indications will be tested in more depth shortly but first, the features of working as a contractor are investigated. As Table 6 illustrates, a number of factors of working life are seen to impact on levels of commitment. Firstly, as the number of years spent in contracting increases commitment moves from the Organisation to the Contracting Agency.

Table 6: The Push/Pull Matrix and Commitment and Features of Working as a Contractor

	Left Prior Work Arrangement To Become a Contractor	Left Prior Work Arrangement & Later Became a Contractor	
Contractor by Choice	<p>PULL</p> <p>Organisation*** $\pi=4.8$</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 9 with 2 years contracting*** - 56 work from someone else's office*** - 20 with pay set by Agency* & 22 at market rates* - 14 with no pay variation* 21 with monthly variation** and 5 with a lot of variation** 12 with moderate*** <p>Contract Agency</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 12 with 5-10 years contracting*** - 20 with pay set by Agency* & 5 negotiated w. client*** - 5 with a lot of income variation*** 	<p>DEFAULT1</p> <p>Organisation</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 8 with 5 years contracting <p>Contract Agency</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 8 with 5 years contracting*** - 9 with weekly income variation*** 	<p>CHOICE</p> <p>Organisation** $\pi=4.8$</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 21 with 2 years contracting***, 16 with 3** & 11 with 5 years* - 110 work from some else's office* - 36 have fees set by Agency*** 27 on market rates* & 48 negotiate with the client** - 33 have moderate income variation** 36 very little*** & 27 a lot*** - 9 earn \$75-85,000***, 7 earn \$105-125,000*** & 37 earn \$185,000+** <p>Contract Agency*** $\pi=4.4$</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 11 with 5 years contracting** & 20 with 5-10 years** - 62 work from home* & 110 from someone else's office* - 10 have weekly income variation*** & 27 varies a lot* - 48 set own fee**, 25 have it set by client*** 36 by the Agency & 48 negotiate w. Client*** - 6 earn \$35-45,000*** & 5 earn \$65-75,000*
Contractor Not by Choice	<p>DEFAULT2</p> <p>Organisation</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 6 negotiate pay with client*** <p>Contract Agency</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 5 work from home*** 	<p>PUSH</p> <p>Organisation</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 5 with 1 dependent*** 	<p>NO CHOICE</p> <p>Organisation</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 13 negotiate with Agency*** - 14 work from home as base***
	<p>DIRECT ENTRY</p> <p>Organisation</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 10 with 2 years contracting*** - 8 have income that varies a lot*** - 9 earn \$75-85,000*** <p>Agency</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 33 have pay set by Agency** - 8 have income that varies a lot*** 	<p>DELAYED ENTRY</p> <p>Agency</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 16 work from home as a base*** 	

*Results significant at the .001 level ** .005 and *** .05

The transition appears to occur after the individual has been contracting for five years and may mark either the acceptance of non-organisational employment and/or acceptance of professional contractor status as an ongoing career.

While the literature generally deals with work location as an issue of control, the Choice sector in Table 6 shows that working in someone else's office produces dual rather than divided commitment. However, individuals working from home generally seem likely to have increased commitment to the Contracting Agency. Method of payment is another aspect of control but produces more complex results. While payment set by the Agency results in dual commitment to both Organisation and Agency, having it set by market rates produces significantly higher commitment to the employing Organisation. This latter situation tends to be associated with labour market advantage and was linked in earlier results with the high-demand occupations of IT, Engineering and, to a lesser extent, Business/Management.

The notion of dual commitment in uncertainty and sole commitment in certainty is further reflected when examining income variation over the year. Where there is a lot of variation individuals appears equally committed to both Agency and Organisation but, as variation decreases, commitment to the Organisation increases - apparently at the expense of the Agency. It thus seems that both parties are advantaged from professional contractors having unpredictable annual incomes but overall, organizations seem to be most advantaged in terms of increased commitment by ensuring moderate to little fluctuation.

It seems to be a situation of mutual advantage between Organisation and professional contractor where increased commitment from professional contractor results from decreased income fluctuation. These contrasts with that of advantage to the Agency with increased fluctuation versus disadvantage to the contractor and is further borne out in the results for annual earnings demonstrated in Table 6. For those entering contracting by Choice, commitment to the Agency is greatest below \$75,000 per annum whereas it moves abruptly to the Organisation above this amount.

Taking the notion further, Table 7 desegregates the original items behind the Matrix to examine the issue of commitment in terms of the initial motivations for becoming a professional contractor. Overall, this analysis reveals distinctions at the Choice/Not by Choice and then the Direct Entry levels rather than within the central quadrants of the Matrix. The discrete nature of voluntary versus involuntary redundancy emerges within the ambit of increased organisational commitment. It appears that Organizations offering contracts to individuals made redundant, either voluntarily or not, benefit from higher levels of commitment. Similarly, individuals contracting for 'Lifestyle' reasons who entered directly contracting from their previous employment are more committed to the organisation they work for rather than the Agency which finds them contract employment.

Table 7: The Push/Pull Matrix, Commitment & Initial Reasons for Contracting

	Left Prior Work Arrangement To Become a Contractor	Left Prior Work Arrangement & Later Became a Contractor	
Contractor by Choice	PULL Organisation - 14 Best Option*** Agency - 14 Best Option***	DEFAULT1 Organisation - 23 Voluntary Redundancy***	CHOICE Organisation - 29 Voluntary Redundancy* Agency - 58 Professional Norm*** - 43 Best Option*** - 37 Employer Request*** - 21 Other reasons**
Contractor Not by Choice	DEFAULT2 Organisation - 5 Lifestyle***	PUSH	NO CHOICE Organisation - 23 Invol. Redundancy*** Agency - 5 Business w. Others***
	DIRECT ENTRY Organisation - 33 Lifestyle** Agency - 29 Best Option***	DELAYED ENTRY	

*Results significant at the .001 ** .005 and ***.05 level

A rather more passive acceptance of the move into a different working life seems to underlie the reasons linked to increased commitment to the Agency. Here, the professional norm previously linked to IT, Engineering and Architecture professions resides beside others who see contracting as the Best Option – apparently from amongst a limited range or after unsuccessful attempts elsewhere. Also, those who moved because of Employer Request may be uncertain about traditional employment expectations and this may explain the resultant increase in commitment to the Agency rather than the current employing Organisation.

The passive versus active dimensions of the move into contracting and the results for commitment are replicated in the reasons individuals are currently contracting is shown in Table 8. Here, the desire for a more stimulating career that offers a flexible lifestyle popularised by writers on the future of work such as Bridges (1995) and Handy (1989) appears to be substantiated. Organisations appear to benefit from increased commitment where contracting offers these. By contrast, increased commitment to the Agency remains associated with the passive features identified in the previous Table. Agency commitment is thus linked to providing the best amongst a seemingly limited range of options- sometimes because it offers more money, some security where an employer has not offered traditional employment or allows some ability to balance work and family commitments.

Table 8: The Push/Pull Matrix, Commitment & Current Reasons for Contracting

	Left Prior Work Arrangement To Become a Contractor	Left Prior Work Arrangement & Later Became a Contractor	
Contractor by Choice	PULL Organisation - 41 Better Career*** - 36 More Stimulating Work* - 28 Flexible lifestyle* - 7 Balance Work Family*** Agency - 22 Best Option*** - 7 Balance Work & Family** - 6 Business with Others***	DEFAULT1	CHOICE Organisation - 60 Flexible Lifestyle** - 53 More Stimulating Work* - 26 Employer Requires It* - 24 Balance Work & Family*** Agency - 48 Best Option*** - 6 Business With Others***
Contractor Not by Choice	DEFAULT2	PUSH Organisation - 14 Employer Request*	NO CHOICE Organisation - 21 More Money***
	DIRECT ENTRY Organisation - 50 More Stimulating Work*** - 38 Flexible Lifestyle*** Agency - 43 Best Option*** - 25 Employer Requires It*** - 14 Balance Work & Children**	DELAYED ENTRY Organisation - 4 Business with Others* Agency - 7 Own Business***	

*Results significant at the .001 ** .005 and *** .05 levels

These are not the profile features of the protean career of Hall (1995) or the symbolic analyst of Reich (1992). They are however a feature of commitment within many of the studies of temporary, casual and peripheral employment in general.

PROFESSIONAL CONTRACTOR COMMITMENT

A number of studies have proposed that commitment is differentiated between the client Organisation and the Agency and the suggestion is that the level of commitment a contractor has to a client organisation will be positively related to the initial 'pull' factors associated with the move into contracting. This has been largely borne out in this study. Similarly, the suggestion that the level of commitment a contractor has to an Agency would be positively related to the initial 'push' factors associated with the move into contracting has largely been confirmed. The overall view is that Agencies benefit from increased professional contractor commitment in situations where the individual is disadvantaged. On the other hand, Organizations incur greater commitment where the professional contractor is advantaged. Within these general statements, advantage and disadvantage are largely interpreted in terms of the features of working life such as vulnerability to income fluctuation and lower annual incomes as well as active versus passive reasons for entering and remaining in contracting.

These findings have implications for both Organizations and Agencies in the way they manage their professional contractor populations, especially if they want to maintain ongoing relationships with them. The strategies an organisation would use to obtain and then retain commitment from its' professional contractor workforce would focus on providing features of mutual benefit whereas that between professional contractor and Agency would appear to rest on a more uneven relationship where unpredictability becomes a key mechanism of control. This use of such strategies is echoed in studies of the temporary help industry (see for example Gottfried, 1991 and Natti, 1995).

Investigating the role of commitment in the professional contractor workforce has failed to support previous empirical research suggesting that the move to peripheral work has a negative impact on commitment to an

employing Organisation. Instead it seems that those most advantaged in the move to contracting appear to exhibit increased commitment to the employing Organisation. It is the contracting Agency that appears to bear the cost of increasing professional contractor advantage and they instead benefit from increased commitment as disadvantage for the professional contractor increases. Findings from the Interviews appear confirmed in that traditional employment is still the desired employment arrangement for many contractors and it is not until individuals have been contracting for more than 5 years that the real move to professional contracting really seems to occur.

Overall, many appear to be struggling to come to terms with the challenges imposed by working outside the norm and will seek support and supply commitment where ever it appears they will receive the most benefit. There is very little evidence of any 'visionary' approach for careers in the twenty-first century but rather one of opportunism related to labour market advantage for some and lack of any other option for others.

CONCLUSION - IMPLICATIONS FOR HUMAN RESOURCE MANAGEMENT

Past notions of the importance of commitment have been severely tested over the last decade, particularly within the professional workforce with the advent of large-scale redundancies and retrenchment for the first time amongst such workers. Paralleling these are also well publicised skill shortages amongst some professional occupations and together, these two features of work today provide explanations of the Push and Pull of contracting. While the ability of the professional contractor to be able to hold dual commitments to the both Agency and employing organisation has a great deal of appeal for all of the parties involved, this study has found that the reasons an individual entered contracting continues to be an influence. While the value of this commitment has not been addressed by this research, extrapolating them to previous findings suggests that increased commitment translates to the willingness of the worker to 'stay' long enough to complete the contract and this is important for both employing organisation and Agency. However, too strong an attachment to an Agency would be of concern to an employing organisation and vice versa. In essence, the contractor may wish to return to an employing organisation – without any benefits accruing to the Agency who made the original placement. Alternatively, the contractor may become more committed to the Agency that always supplies 'good' placements. The earlier interviews carried out with CA representatives indicated that this was the desirable situation for them as then the contractor becomes their "inside" person, letting them know of future contract opportunities. One of the key areas for developing commitment used by Agencies was the provision of training and briefing sessions to their registered contractors. At the same time, Agencies expressed an awareness of the fierce competition for the best contractors but were also concerned that they may not see any return on their investment. The Survey results clearly show Agencies that do provide these services do in fact receive increased commitment. The exploratory interviews indicated that access to training and social events generally excludes contractors – and results in reduced commitment and should be of interest to HR managers who are being exhorted to seamlessly integrate the contract and core employee workforces (Jacobs, 1994). Overall, provision of access to training is generally not considered the responsibility of the employing organisation or the Agency. But it appears to be an avenue worth considering as a tool for both integrating and managing a contractor workforce within an organisation or as a means of an Agency retaining more exclusive access to high-demand contractors.

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