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Worker commitment in the Australian film industry

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Commitment, Film Industry, Equity Theory, Grounded Theory

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Worker Commitment in the Australian Film Industry

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Refereed Paper

Non-Refereed Paper

Abstract:

Worker commitment in the Australian Film Industry is examined in this paper. Workers express a perceived inequity with regard to the inputs versus their outcomes. However, their continued engagement and persistent hard work in the industry would indicate a state of equity. Adams' Equity Theory has been used in this research as a tool to help uncover the various factors which work to implicitly return equity to film workers. The commitment factors that have emerged through the research are discussed, and are considered in light of the factors which have surfaced through a preliminary literature review.

Introduction:

This study looks at what encourages workers in the Australian Film Industry to commit to working on a film project. The conditions faced by most of these workers appear to be quite harsh and unfair, especially given the rewards they perceive as the outcomes of their effort. They continually face difficulties and hardships that would not be deemed as desirable work attributes by most people; they regularly meet with conditions and challenges like: long hours; irregular work; poor pay; changing environments and conditions; high pressure and short deadlines; large and tightly controlled budgets; creative, volatile and passionate personalities, and more. As one Producer put it:

There's a way in which the toughness of the environment, which is undeniably tough, ... in most industries management would avoid such a tough and pressured environment but in film pressure you can't avoid it because of the complexity involved and of the deadlines involved and of the myriad skills involved you can't really avoid the tough environment. (Jim-Producer 2004)

Research has been conducted in the Australian Film Industry in an endeavour to gain an understanding as to why people work so hard in an industry which seems to provide little obvious reward to so many, yet requires such high inputs. Adams' Equity Theory can be used to establish a comparative understanding of the issues workers in the Australian Film Industry face with regard to motivation and commitment.

Although a much debated theory of work motivation (Haslam 2004), equity theory (Adams 1965) provides an insightful framework by which work motives can be questioned. The intention of using equity theory here is not to provide a substantive

test of worker motives, but to demonstrate that there is a difference between what workers *perceive* as being fair, and what is the *actual* fairness in a work situation. In a similar vein researchers have used a related theory of motivation – expectancy theory – to illustrate conceptual constructs: “Irrespective of its flaws in explaining individual cognitive processes, it has proved useful in identifying the potential determinants of the motivation process and performance outcomes” (Benkhoff 1997: 703).

The theory holds that workers will continuously seek a state of equity, and seek to balance their inputs to their outcomes ratio, and to maintain a proportion of inputs to outcomes which is consistent with others with whom they compare. Given this, a worker will compare what they provide their workplace in terms of skills, knowledge, labour and other inputs to what they receive from the organisation in return – salary, promotion, training, comfort, independence, social contact, personal satisfaction, and other opportunities (Deci 1975). This ratio will be compared to the ratio of others – *referents* – usually in a similar work environment or situation. Any imbalance – *inequity* – creates a tension which must be relieved. (Adams 1965; Doyle 2003; Porter, Bigley and Steers 2003). Adams came up with an equation to illustrate this concept (See Figure 1). According to Adams, in the case of under payment inequity, where the worker contributes inputs in excess of returns or outcomes, the affected worker will take at least one of six steps to restore equity: (1) they will reduce the amount or quality of inputs, (2) they will be driven to increase their expected outcomes, (3) they will cognitively devalue their inputs, or cognitively increase their outcomes, (4) they will leave the workplace and seek a more equitable situation elsewhere, (5) they will take actions to either increase the inputs, or decrease the

outcomes of their referent other, and (6) they will try and find a new referent who provides a more equitable comparison (Porter, Bigley et al. 2003). Through his own empirical research, Pritchard extends Adams' original concept of 'comparison with other', by finding that in cases of under-payment inequity the worker "will experience dissatisfaction with his own (sic) situation, irrespective of any comparison person" (1969: 209), in which case the person will not seek a comparison other.

$$\frac{O_p}{I_p} = \frac{O_r}{I_r}$$

O = Outcomes

I = Inputs

p = person being observed

r = referent other

FIGURE 1.
An equitable situation. From Adams 1965.

Accordingly, it can be assumed that, in most cases, workers within organisations which maintain minimal employee turnover, and also manage a degree of organisational success through the satisfaction of organisational objectives, are in a state of equity. Therefore, where there exists a case of perceived inequity, which is supported by *prima facie* evidence, there must be factors present which act to modify the perceived inputs or outcomes, and which act upon the worker to balance the relationship between inputs and outcomes, thus providing actual equity. An analysis of individual work conditions and individual worker commitment would therefore explicate these differences between perceived and actual inputs and outcomes.

A study of worker commitment and motivation was undertaken in the Australian Film Industry. Over a period of eighteen months interview evidence from sixteen film-workers were compiled and analysed following the principles of Grounded Theory (Glaser and Strauss 1967).

Grounded Theory has been used in this study because it provides the researcher with an opportunity to discover what is happening in any given situation without experiencing the bias of *a priori* knowledge. This provides the advantage of reserving the need for the researcher to conceive preliminary hypotheses, thus ensuring greater freedom to explore the research area and allow issues to emerge (Glaser 1978, 1992, 1998; Ardern 1999; Glaser 2001; Bryant 2002). Grounded Theory “is an inductive, theory discovery methodology that allows the researcher to develop a theoretical account of the general features of a topic while simultaneously grounding the account in empirical observations or data” (Martin and Taylor 1986: 141).

Grounded Theory takes a research approach, which is contrary to most of the more conventional research models. Data collection, coding and analysis occur immediately, concurrently, and throughout. The process is not impeded by the development of research problems, theoretical understanding or literature review. Instead, the researcher is granted the freedom to enter the field and discover the main concerns of participants and analyse ways they resolve these problems. Grounded Theory is founded on the conceptualisation of data through coding, using a method of constant comparison. Data, mainly in the form of transcripts, observations or literature, are fractured into conceptual codes, which during a process of comparison, combine to form meaningful categories, which then, through a process of abstraction,

eventually become substantive theories or conceptual hypotheses (Glaser and Holton 2004). Rigorous application of the Grounded Theory method yields a set of categories – usually a core-category, coupled with some sub-categories – which explain concisely and comprehensively the problem that is being studied (Glaser 1978).

Management research in the domain of film management, especially in Australia has received little academic interest: “Current managerial and organisational research has tended to bypass this area of business with only a few research programs taking any interest (Blair 2000; Starkey, Barnatt and Tempest 2000; Cunningham 2002)” (Jones and Kirsch 2004: 5). From a methodological, theoretical and applied view, therefore, Grounded Theory provides a useful framework of inquiry from which to study a relatively untouched area of organisational research.

The study commenced with a view to gaining an understanding of the management practices of film production. However, as the process of analysis and theoretical sampling (Glaser 1978) led the researcher to examine the process at continually deeper levels it became evident that there was a perceived inequity in the industry; that workers and managers in the Australian Film Industry, who continued to work in a state of *apparent equity* considered that their inputs exceeded their returns and a state of *perceived inequity* was realised. The research continued in an effort to learn what factors were acting to balance the equation and maintain a situation of worker motivation regarding the contribution of each worker to the achievement of organisational goals.

Workers in the Australian Film Industry bring onto the set essential inputs: they provide value added labour (skills, knowledge and experience). They provide the executives of the project, the investors, and eventually the viewing public with a saleable commodity based on their reputation and notoriety, and finally, in some cases they provide essential equipment – the gaffer department bring their camera cranes and dolly's – the makeup department bring makeup. In return for these inputs, and apart from financial remuneration, the staff expect certain outcomes. For instance, workers will expect their efforts to lead to a successful film, which will yield further work, as well as other satisfactions. They will also expect to play a creative part in the communication of the story and vision.

Steers (1977) found three groups of antecedents which act as variables to determine the level of commitment a worker will have towards their workplace. The first group are personal characteristics, these are factors which define the worker, and include age, opportunities for achievement, education, and role tension. The second group regards the characteristics of the job and include challenge, social interaction, and feedback. The last group specified the importance of work experience, as work experience is viewed “as a major socializing force and as such represents an important influence on the extent to which psychological attachments are formed with the organization” (Steers 1977: 48), these include group attitudes, organisation dependability and trust, levels of personal investment, feelings of personal importance to the organisation, and the expectations of rewards. Over the years these antecedent factors have been validated by various researchers (Grusky 1966; Mowday, Porter and Steers 1982; Meyer and Allen 1997; Camilleri 2002).

Camilleri (2002) tested six of these developed antecedents (age; gender; educational standard; position tenure within the organisation; marital status; role states, in terms of ambiguity, conflict, overload). His analysis, based on an empirical examination of an IT company found that of these factors only three had any real effect on commitment. His findings support the hypotheses that (a) the lower the standard of education of the employee the higher the degree of commitment, this is due mainly to the increase mobility of higher education workers; (b) the higher the hierarchal position of an employee the greater the level of commitment. This is due to the imbedded job satisfaction that the position provides relative to lower positions; and (c) the higher the levels of ambiguity, conflict and overload the lower the degree of commitment. This is based on the amount of stress these factors bring, and the greater the stress in an environment, the more demotivated workers become, leading to a desire to find less stressful situations elsewhere. These factors are detailed in Table 1.

Salancik (1977: 4-7) discusses four groups of factors which contribute toward organisational commitment. While Steers provides an inventory of behaviours which are largely exogenous, the four factors discussed by Salancik are typically endogenous, which he calls behavioural acts. These behavioural acts work to bind a person to their chosen path, and are useful in illustrating how action determines levels of commitment. These behaviours are equally valid in all situations, including the commitment of an employee to their work organisation.

The first factor is *explicitness*. Explicitness is based on the degree to which action is observed and equivocated. The more observable an act and the less ambiguous it is,

the more explicit the action will be, and therefore a greater level of commitment can be implied. A second factor affecting commitment is *revocability*. Acts which are irrevocable and which cannot be reversed are more committing. Acts characterised as such indicate a strong binding to the chosen path. A third factor, *volition*, determines the person's exercise of free will. A person who willingly and voluntarily chooses an action is showing more commitment than one who is forced to act. Volition is regulated by choice, external pressure, extrinsic motivation, and the commitment of others towards the action. The final factor identified by Salancik (1977) is *publicity*. This factor places action into a social context and determines how binding an action will be, based on who has been informed of the commitment and how important they are to the person committing the act.

From this discussion we can list a range of factors which moderate commitment:

Exogenous Factors	Effect on Commitment
Education	The higher the education level, the less commitment is likely
Hierarchical Position	The higher the position in the company, the greater the commitment
Role States	The greater the ambiguity, conflict and overload the lower the commitment
Endogenous Factors	Effect on Commitment
Explicitness	The more explicit an action, the greater the commitment
Revocability	The more irrevocable an act, the greater the commitment
Volition	The greater the volition, the greater the commitment
Publicity	The more public an act, the greater the commitment

Table 1. Factors which effect commitment (Salancik 1977; Camilleri 2002):

The empirical evidence taken from workers in the Australian Film Industry suggests that these factors have validity in this environment also. The research finds that workers face two sets conflicting influences which in some workers enable commitment, but in others inhibit commitment. (Refer to figure 2). These two sides

are always in contention, and in the average person will determine whether entry into, and commitment to, the industry is desirable. The findings of this study show that for some of the subjects involved, the inhibitors often outweigh the enablers, and that only in certain people, those who are attracted to the industry, are the enablers more influential than the inhibitors. It is therefore the exception that is being highlighted in this process of commitment. Only individuals who have the unique attributes required by the industry will be committed to it.

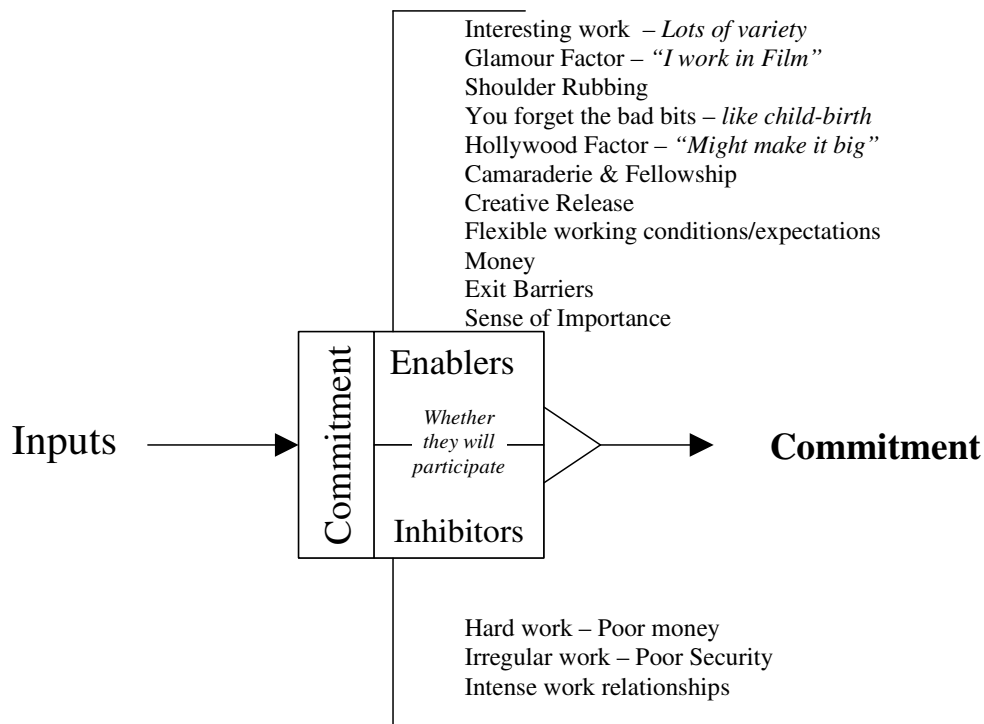


Figure 2. Commitment in the Australian Film Industry

On the counter side to commitment are the inhibitors. These are the factors which contrive to make working in the Australian Film Industry quite undesirable. These factors arise mainly due to the unique environment and working relations that develop in the industry. Work is often scarce and unpredictable, but when it is available it is very hard and intense. People work long hours with lots of pressure and constraints,

and with little overall financial reward. Working in film often means being away from home, family and friends for extended periods of time with a group of people who, facing similar hardships and pressure, can be sometimes overbearing and unreasonable. As one interviewee states: “If there was that much work that I could say no because there was a particular relationship, or person, on that actual set that I didn’t get along with, I probably would. But there’s not enough work in the industry to say that, to have that choice” (Simon-Gaffer 2005).

For people who overlook these disincentives, the level of commitment they apply to their job is immense. When they work, workers in the Australian Film Industry – cast, crew or executive – work very hard, at least ten hours a day, five days a week, but more often 14 hours a day for six days a week, depending on the person’s position and function, and this work is generally both physically and mentally demanding, and all for quite ordinary wages. Attracting these people are a host of enablers. These are factors which address the character and nature of the work, and the appeal and interest of the industry. Some of these factors are discussed below:

- *Interesting Work.* Working in the film industry does not readily compare to work in other fields. Many of the factors which would turn most people away are the very same things that attract many others to the industry in the first place. The work is seldom monotonous but is quite the reverse; it is often unpredictable, usually different, and frequently interesting. This is seen by many as strong compensation for the poor offerings that comprise the inhibitors. People like the freedom that working in film gives them: “They don’t want to be constrained by normal jobs” (Vera-Production-Manager 2005) and people, those who have passed beyond the restraints of the

inhibitors, find they work with others who are of similar spirit, who share their love of this type of life: “[I] just liked the style of the type of people who work in the industry. It’s a glorified rock and roll industry, that’s what I like to call it (Simon-Gaffer 2005).

- *Glamour.* While most people would hold the opinion that the Film Industry is glamorous, this is in fact a paradox. “The so-called ‘glamour’ of moviemaking is perhaps the public’s single greatest misperception of the arduous reality behind the physically and psychologically demanding process of making a motion picture” (Sammon 1996: 204). From without, the industry appears to be very glamorous. From within, the workers say it is not glamorous, but it is still abundantly apparent (despite their espousals) that these workers who deny the glamour are in fact enamoured by it, and this connexion is enough to enable a level of commitment from them. Empirical evidence supports this observation; the industry is glamorous, its not a simple nine-to-five office job, and its not factory drudgery. The job is interesting, it is held in high regard by the public, and this extends to the family and friends of every worker, and while the workers themselves may deny the glamour, it has an influence on them either directly or through their friends and family and this influence has psychological consequences which supports organisational commitment.
- *Shoulder Rubbing.* People will often take on the next job because of the people who come with it, eg a famous director or actor, and the potential for networking or socialising this provides. This ‘shoulder rubbing’ then provides them with the opportunity to expand their career horizons, or to learn something new or important, or just to bask in the glory of a really well-liked

or famous person. This factor helps to alleviate the progressive or accumulative effects which long-term exposure to the inhibitors may create. Over time people may become inured to the fun and the glamour, and will begin to feel the effects of stress and financial deprivation – however, the opportunity to work with a hero or role model, or to finetune or complement some diminished skills works to keep many people going and committed.

- *The Hollywood Factor.* Many of the workers put up with the hardships because they hope that one day they will make it big, that they will work on the right film, the one that will give them fame, and money, and a surety of future employment.
- *Camaraderie and Fellowship.* On the one hand, the work relationships are intense, difficult and demonstrative and this serves to inhibit willing participation. On the other hand however, these relationships are highly sociable and cohesive, workers look forward to working with fellow associates over and over again. They are often attracted to the next job because of the people who are also working on that job.
- *Flexible Working Conditions and Expectations.* To work in the Australian Film Industry, you don't need to fit into a pre-formed mould. People have almost unlimited freedom and flexibility. While their activities are directed by superiors in the hierarchy, they are not controlled, and most work autonomously, and while they need to be punctilious in regard to time, they can wear what they want, and can play and have fun while they work. Every person can select the project they want to commit to, and the industry allows them the grace to decline any job they don't want.

- *Sense of Importance.* A final factor, which adds an element of self-esteem to the individual's need to commit to the industry, is the fact that they feel that this job serves an important community function, that they are adding social value to the community.

To the people who have made film their career, many of these factors provide sufficient drive to enable commitment to the industry. These influences share some similarity to those factors identified by Salancik (1977) and Camilleri (2002).

While education and hierarchical position are less of a concern to workers in the Australian Film Industry, role states is of great concern. The very structure of a film project means there is a large degree of ambiguity, conflict and overload involved in the work. Workers are stressed by these conditions, and this causes many of the workers to seek employment elsewhere, thus reducing commitment.

Of the endogenous factors identified by Salancik (1977), all of them have a bearing on commitment in the Australian Film Industry. The work that filmmakers undertake has a large degree of explicitness, the work is highly visible, and the quality reflects greatly on the expertise of each worker. The nature of work in film – tight schedules, the cost of film, and the expense of sets – also renders many of the tasks performed by film workers as irrevocable, they enter each task knowing that what they do cannot be undone.

Volition is another major factor in determining the commitment of film workers, and it works on two levels. The working conditions are such that they allow absolute freedom for workers to pick and choose which project they will involve themselves in; therefore commitment to their chosen project is largely based on free will. On a second dimension, workers, while constrained by the direction of the executive staff – director and producer – have enormous flexibility in how they execute their tasks. This comes about due to the high requirement for creativity; each worker is an artist and must be permitted a certain amount of creative license. This relies on the worker's sense of professionalism. The final factor discussed by Salancik (1977) is publicity. Filmmaking is a public domain. Film projects are often discussed publicly. When a worker commits to working on a film project it is often a public gesture, regardless of what position within the crew they take their commitment is at some level publicly endorsed.

Commitment, and consequently equity, is therefore achieved through various factors which while not being immediately apparent to the film workers nevertheless exist, and together work to bind these people to the industry and to their chosen project.

Conclusion:

Equity Theory provides a useful tool for evaluating worker commitment. In the case of the Australian Film Industry workers perceived an inequity, in that their inputs were not equal to their outcomes. However, as they continued to work in the industry and to re-engage in project after project, in accordance with Equity Theory, there must be factors which contribute to the equation which provide balance. This study

has identified several factors which indeed act to provide equity, these factors have been discussed and their impact on commitment explicated. Workers in the Australian Film Industry do in fact achieve equity.

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