Are They One of Us? Why Retention Strategies Should Ensure that Contingent Employees Identify with the Organization

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Introduction

This chapter has two related, yet distinct, objectives. The first objective is to present a discussion on the influence of organizational identification on contingent knowledge workers’ willingness to continue their contractual engagement with an organization. The second objective is to propose a set of principles grounded in the context developed through the first objective that will help managers formulate effective retention strategies capable of securing long-term human capital for their organizations.

To accomplish these objectives, I will first present a brief literature review on organizational identification, as the phenomenon relates to commitment towards, and willingness to remain with, the organization. This will focus on a specific group of contingent knowledge workers – namely, adjunct faculty members teaching at universities. I will then present a research study that explored the way 48 adjunct faculty members, working at various universities in the mid-Atlantic region of the US identified with their organizations, to better understand how and at what level participants identified with the institutions at which they served, and how their level of identification influenced these individuals’ willingness to continue contractual agreements with their universities.

In the final section of the chapter, I will discuss some practical strategies that are grounded in organizational identification that managers could use to ensure that contingent employees feel part of the organization. In this discussion I argue that, from the employees’ perspective, being able to fulfil the need to belong translates into the desire to remain with the organization. Meeting this need is critical at a time when effective retention strategies, capable of securing the commitment of skilled workers, constitute a major competitive advantage in our global economy (Vaiman, 2008).
Literature review

The turn of the century has marked the beginning of a period when organizational landscapes have started rapidly changing to become more complex, with increasingly diverse configurations that govern work arrangements (Albert et al., 2000). In this organizational climate, researchers are trying to better understand the dynamics of organizational identification, as it is perceived by many as a medium through which employees’ long-term cooperation may be secured (Wiesenfeld et al., 1999; Fuller et al., 2006). An increasing number of human resources programmes, as well as functional unit managers, are employing this medium to promote organizational performance and to secure employee commitment for both embedded and remote employees (Van Dick et al., 2007).

There are several influential definitions of organizational identification that relate to the affective, behavioural, and cognitive dimensions of the phenomenon (Pratt, 1998). Furthermore, research (Van Dick et al., 2004) has proposed that ‘different foci of identification (for example, with own career, team, organization, occupation) as well as different dimensions of organizational identification (cognitive, affective, evaluative, and behavioral) can be separated’ (p. 171). While there is a growing body of literature on organizational identification investigating the properties and impact of this key construct in organizational behaviour (Kreiner and Ashforth, 2004; Fuller et al., 2006), our investigation focuses on the cognitive dimension of the identification process, whereby an embedded member’s self-identity is compared with the perceived group identity, the perceived organizational identity, and the perceived external image of the organization, as illustrated in Figure 4.1.

One of the widely accepted definitions of organizational identification is ‘the degree to which a member defines himself or herself by the same attributes that he or she believes define the organization’ (Dutton et al.,

![Figure 4.1 The three distinct focal points of identification](image-url)