

# Journal of Vocational Behavior

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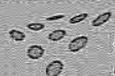
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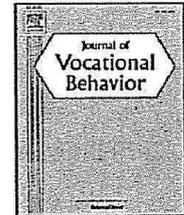
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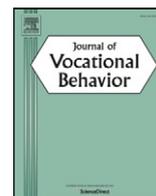


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## The relationship between career growth and organizational commitment

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### ABSTRACT

This research examines the relationship between employees' career growth and organizational commitment. Career growth was conceptualized by four factors: career goal progress, professional ability development, promotion speed and remuneration growth, while organizational commitment was conceptualized using Meyer and Allen's (1997) three component model. Survey data, collected from 961 employees in 10 cities in the People's Republic of China, showed that the four dimensions of career growth were positively related to affective commitment, and that three of the facets were positively related to continuance and normative commitment. Only three of eighteen two-way interactions among the career growth factors affected organizational commitment, suggesting that the career growth factors influence commitment in an additive rather than a multiplicative manner. Results focus on how career growth can be used to manage organizational commitment.

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### Introduction

The new economy has changed the way organizations are structured and managed (Arthur, Inkson, & Pringle, 1999). It has also modified employee–organization relationships (Coyle-Shapiro, Shore, Taylor, & Tetrick, 2004) and raised questions about how career development activities now fit into the exchange relations between employees and organizations. Gone are the days when one's career was tied to a single organization, as career change and job mobility have become common phenomena (Rousseau, 1998). These changes have influenced both individuals and organizations. Research has shown that career growth is one of the most important factors cited by students in their job choice decision (Hu, Weng, & Yang, 2008). Today, however, individuals seeking to gain personal career growth can do so across different organizations, if such opportunities are lacking within their current employer, making organizational commitment less salient to these individuals. Loss of such talent, on the other hand, is detrimental to organizations, so organizations strive to prevent such talent loss by developing a committed workforce. The purpose of this paper is to investigate the relationship between individuals' career growth and the organization's desire for a committed workforce.

Bits and pieces of research suggest that career growth has a bearing on organizational commitment. Alvi and Ahmed (1987), in a study of 2000 Pakistani employees, found that employees who perceive high promotional opportunities in their organization have higher levels of organizational commitment. Personal development opportunity (Liu & Wang, 2001), promotion equity and training (Long, Fang, & Ling, 2002) and opportunity for learning (Ng, Butts, Vandenberg, DeJoy, & Wilson, 2006) have independently been shown to affect employees' commitment to their organizations. Such research suggests that, in general, the ability of employees to personally grow and develop within their places of employment affects their psychological attachment to employers. Moreover, this research suggests that organizations can influence employee commitment by

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recognizing and rewarding such growth. What is less clear are the specifics associated within this relationship. For example, organizational commitment is a multi-dimensional concept, so the question of which dimensions of commitment are affected by career growth remains. Moreover, career growth can also be viewed as a multi-dimensional construct. Weng and Hu (2009) suggest that career growth consists of meeting career goals, developing one's professional abilities and receiving promotions and compensation commensurate with those abilities. These aspects of career growth may differentially affect organizational commitment.

### **Career growth and organizational commitment**

Much of the research on career growth examines the *process* of growing in one's career, e.g., career self management (Guterman, 1991; Sturges, Guest, Conway, & Davey, 2002; Weng & McElroy, 2009) rather than on the *results* of such efforts. Career growth captures the results of one's efforts by defining it as one's perceptions of the chances of development and advancement within an organization (Jans, 1989). Unfortunately, little attention has been paid to the specific ways in which employees might judge their chances for development and advancement. Weng and Hu (2009) recently proposed that employee career growth could be captured by four factors: career goal progress, professional ability development, promotion speed, and remuneration growth. This multi-dimensional conceptualization implies that career growth is both a function of the employees' own efforts in making progress toward their personal career goals and acquiring new skills *and* the organization's efforts in rewarding such efforts, through promotions and salary increases. This multi-dimensional view of career growth can also be construed as fulfillment of promises on the part of the employer implied by the psychological contract, which in turn has been found to be positively related to employees' organizational commitment (Coyle-Shapiro & Morrow, 2006).

Rousseau (1998) has suggested two specific ways in which organizations can strengthen employee-organizational commitment: (1) organizations can enhance perceptions of the value of organizational membership and (2) demonstrate to employees that they are valued by the organization. It would seem that fostering employee assessments of career growth by assisting employees in meeting career goals, acquiring new skills and then reinforcing these activities by promotions and salary increases would achieve higher levels of organizational commitment.

#### *Career growth and affective commitment*

Affective commitment refers to employees' psychological attachment to their organizations caused by their identification with the objectives and values of their organizations. In other words, employees are loyal to and choose to remain with their organizations because they want to (Meyer, Allen, & Smith, 1993). One reason for wanting to remain with the organization is related to the ability of individuals to satisfy their needs at work (Hackman & Oldham, 1976). As defined here, career growth encapsulates need satisfaction at a number of levels; suggesting that career growth would be positively related to affective organizational commitment. This argument is supported by Meyer et al.'s (1993) contention that affective commitment will be higher for employees whose experiences in their organization satisfy their needs than for those with less satisfying organizational experiences. Meeting career goals and achieving professional ability development exemplify higher order need satisfaction while promotion and remuneration provide measures of how one is viewed by their organization. Organizations that allow employees to experience career growth create a mutual investment type of employee-organizational relationship (Tsui, Pearce, Porter, & Tripoli, 1997). Hom et al. (2009) assert that such a relationship leads to the employee feeling greater compatibility with the organization leading to higher affective organizational commitment. Consequently, individuals who experience career growth by working on tasks that are related to their career goals, and allowing them to learn new things and grow professionally, and who perceive that the organization is willing to reward them for their efforts, will have higher levels of affective commitment. Conversely, employees whose career goals are difficult to achieve, who are assigned tasks that do not allow for growth, and who perceive little connection between their efforts and organizational rewards, will have lower affective commitment. Thus, we propose the following:

**Hypothesis 1.** Career growth is positively associated with affective commitment.

**H1a.** Career goal progress is positively associated with affective commitment.

**H1b.** Professional ability development is positively associated with affective commitment.

**H1c.** Promotion speed is positively associated with affective commitment.

**H1d.** Remuneration growth is positively associated with affective commitment.

#### *Career growth and continuance commitment*

Continuance commitment is a function of the perceived cost of leaving an organization, due to what Becker (1960) refers to as "side bets." In other words, people feel a sense of commitment to their organization because they feel they have to remain (Meyer et al., 1993). To do otherwise would be to forgo favorable levels of personal status, seniority, remuneration, work schedule, pension, and other benefits acquired. Consequently, any factor that increases the perceived costs of resigning can be

seen as a predictor of continuance commitment (Meyer & Allen, 1991). The perceived cost of leaving the organization may be organization or job related, such as seniority or an organizational-specific job skill that is not transferrable, or may be independent of the organization, such as relocation of family or distancing of friendship networks (i.e., job embeddedness, Hom et al., 2009).

People who perceive that their current job helps them attain their career goals are likely to attach a higher cost to leaving the organization; e.g., by interrupting career goal progress or, at minimum, risking such interruption since finding another job that equals one's current career goal progress may be difficult. These employees should have high levels of continuance commitment. Conversely, employees perceiving low career goal progress in their present job see little to no risk in leaving for potentially equal or greener pastures and ought to express lower levels of continuance commitment.

Perceptions of professional development being provided by the employer are thought to be similarly related to continuance commitment. Simply put, opportunity for learning at work has become an important determinant of employee job attitudes and behaviors (Lankau & Scandura, 2002). If the present job is allowing the employee to develop more/better job skills, then continuance commitment should be high as there is potentially much to be lost by pursuing a job change. On the other hand, people who perceive little professional development within their current job have little to sacrifice by leaving and are likely to exhibit low continuance commitment.

With respect to the third and fourth facets of career growth, organizations can build on continuance commitment by providing ample promotion opportunities and pay raises. Doing so will make leaving that organization more costly to the employee which should increase their levels of continuance commitment. On the contrary, people who perceive little opportunity for promotion or remuneration growth have little to give up in terms of leaving the organization. These arguments lead us to propose the following:

**Hypothesis 2.** Career growth is positively associated with continuance commitment.

**H2a.** Career goal progress is positively associated with continuance commitment.

**H2b.** Professional ability development is positively related to continuance commitment.

**H2c.** Promotion speed is positively associated with continuance commitment.

**H2d.** Remuneration growth is positively associated with continuance commitment.

#### *Career growth and normative commitment*

Normative commitment refers to the employee's psychological attachment to the organization based on either socialization experiences that emphasize the appropriateness of remaining loyal or a moral obligation to repay the organization for benefits received from the organization (Meyer et al., 1993). Stated differently, employees with high normative commitment stay in the organization because they believe it is the right and moral thing to do (Wiener, 1982). Normative commitment is based on norms of reciprocity; people should help and not hurt those who have helped them (Gouldner, 1960). Consequently, employees who believe that the organization is contributing to their career growth will feel a moral sense of obligation to give back to the organization in return. Wiener (1982) notes that one of the bases for developing an employee's moral obligation is the organization's financial support of employee education. Meyer and Herscovitch (2001) also contend that normative commitment comes from the norms of reciprocity associated with accepting the benefits of the organization. While these benefits are typically viewed in terms of things like educational benefits and mentoring programs, we propose that they extend to the receipt of promotions and raises as well. Based on the analysis above, we infer that when the organization provides a good career growth platform for their employees, by helping them meet career goals and enhance their professional abilities, and rewards them in return via promotions and remuneration, those employees are more apt to reciprocate and develop a sense of moral obligation toward the organization. Therefore, we propose the following hypotheses:

**Hypothesis 3.** Career growth is positively associated with normative commitment.

**H3a.** Career goal progress is positively associated with normative commitment.

**H3b.** Professional ability development is positively associated with normative commitment.

**H3c.** Promotion speed is positively associated with normative commitment.

**H3d.** Remuneration growth is positively associated with normative commitment.

In summary, organizations can strengthen each form of organizational commitment by providing opportunities for individuals to grow and by reinforcing such growth with appropriate rewards. This is consistent with Meyer and Allen (1997) contention that some human resource management practices may work to influence all three components of organizational commitment. In order to determine whether these career goal factors can be combined to obtain an extra boost in organizational commitment, we offer the following exploratory hypothesis:

**Hypothesis 4.** High levels of career growth factors will interact to enhance affective, continuance, and normative commitment.

## Methods

### Sample

A total of 1200 surveys were distributed to 176 companies operating in 9 cities of China. Of the 1109 surveys returned, 961 were complete enough for use, resulting in a usable response rate of 80%. The cities and number of usable questionnaires are as follows: Shenzhen, 108, Zhongshan, 101, Hangzhou, 204, Ningbo, 81, Wuhan, 86, Zhengzhou, 70, Kunming, 113, Luoyang, 97, and Fuzhou, 101. To avoid any one city or company skewing the results, between 10 and 25 organizations in each city were chosen with no more than 10 respondents from any given company. Sample characteristics are shown in Table 1.

### Measures

The survey consisted of measures designed to capture the various facets of the two *concepts being investigated in this research, career growth and organizational commitment*. All of the items in the questionnaire employed a five-point Likert scale format (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree, unless otherwise indicated).

#### Career growth

Scales developed by Weng and Hu (2009) were used to measure the four dimensions of career growth: career goal progress, professional ability development, promotion speed and remuneration growth. Career goal progress was measured by four questions: (1) “my present job moves me closer to my career goals,” (2) “my present job is relevant to my career goals and vocational growth,” (3) “my present job sets the foundation for the realization of my career goals,” and (4) “my present job provides me with good opportunities to realize my career goals.” Professional ability development was measured by four questions: (1) “my present job encourages me to continuously gain new and job-related skills,” (2) “my present job encourages me to continuously gain new job-related knowledge,” (3) “my present job encourages me to accumulate richer work experiences,” and (4) “my present job enables me to continuously improve my professional capabilities.” Promotion speed was measured by four questions: (1) “my promotion speed in the present organization is fast,” (2) “the probability of being promoted in my present organization is high,” (3) “compared with previous organizations, my position in my present one is ideal” and (4) “compared with my colleagues, I am being promoted faster.” Finally, remuneration growth was measured by three questions: (1) “my salary is growing quickly in my present organization,” (2) “In this organization, the possibility of my current salary being increased is very large,” (3) “Compared with my colleagues, my salary has grown more quickly.” All scales showed good evidence of reliability with coefficient alphas for career goal progress, professional ability development, promotion speed and remuneration growth being .85, .86, .80, and .78, respectively.

#### Organizational commitment

Six-item scales developed by Meyer and Allen (1997) were used to measure the three dimensions of organizational commitment. Sample items for affective commitment include: (1) “I would be very happy to spend the rest of my career with this organization” and (2) “I really feel as if this organization’s problems are my problems.” Sample continuance commitment items include: (1) “Right now, staying with my organization is a matter of necessity as much as desire,” (2) “It would be very hard for me to leave my organization right now, even if I wanted to.” Finally, items representative of normative commitment include: (1) “I do not feel any obligation to remain with my current employer” (reverse coded), (2) “Even if it were to my advantage, I do not feel it would be right to leave my organization now.” Coefficient alphas for the three scales were .86, .84, and .78, for affective, continuance, and normative commitment, respectively.

**Table 1**  
Demographic characteristics.

Classification	Variable	N	%
Gender	Female	636	66.2
	Male	304	31.6
Education	Below the diploma	223	23.2
	3 years certificate/diploma	281	29.2
	Bachelors of BSN	360	29.2
	Master's degree/Ph.D.	759	7.9
Age(year)	25 or younger	251	26.1
	26–30	319	33.2
	31–45	226	23.5
	Older than 45	142	14.8
Position held	Senior manager	86	8.9
	Middle manager	138	14.4
	Frontline manager	253	26.3
	Professional personnel	105	10.9
	Technician	348	36.2

### Control variables

Data were also collected on respondent gender, age and education level. Age was operationalized using four categories: (under 26 years old, 26–30, 31–45 and over 45 years old). Education was grouped by less than a college education, some college, a bachelor's degree, and graduate degree. Finally, the relationship between career growth and organizational commitment does not take place within a vacuum. The idea of the boundaryless career (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996) means that individuals can pursue career growth opportunities outside of their employing organizations, if they think they exist. Meta-analytic data support a negative association between perceived alternate employment opportunities and organizational commitment (Griffeth, Hom, & Gaertner, 2000). Consequently, in this study we also controlled for the existence of perceived opportunities. Perceived opportunities was measured using a four-item scale adapted from scales reported by Griffeth and Hom (1988), Hui, Law and Chen (1999), Steel and Griffeth (1989), and Wheeler, Gallagher, Brouer and Sablinski (2007). The items were: (1) "It would not be difficult for me to find a new job after leaving this organization." (2) "I feel there are many opportunities for development outside my current organization." (3) "With my skills and competence, it is very easy to find another suitable job." (4) "If I leave this organization, there are many available new jobs for me to choose from." The internal reliability estimate for this scale was .72.

## Results

### Validity test of the career growth and organizational commitment scales

In order to establish the validity of operationalizing career growth as a four component model, confirmatory factor analysis was used to compare the fitness of the one-dimensional model (all items share the same factor), two-dimensional model (career goal progress and professional ability development share a factor, and promotion speed and remuneration growth share another factor), three-dimensional model (promotion speed and remuneration growth share a factor) and four-dimensional model. The results show that the fitness of the four-dimensional model is the best (Chi-Squares/ $df$  = 1.505, GFI = .93, AGFI = .91, RMSEA = .064, NNFI = .97, CFI = .98). Similarly, confirmatory factor analysis was used to assess the validity of operationalizing organizational commitment as a three component model. Following Chen and Francesco (2003) and Lee, Allen and Smith (2000), the fitness of the one-dimensional model (all items share the same factor), two-dimensional model (affective and normative commitment share a factor), three-dimensional and four-dimensional model (continuous commitment being divided into two factors) were assessed. Results showed that the three-dimensional model was the best fit (Chi-Squares/ $df$  = 2.16, GFI = .89, AGFI = .85, RMSEA = .071, NNFI = .95, CFI = .96).

### Correlations

The means, standard deviations, and intercorrelation matrix for the study's variables are shown in Table 2. Affective commitment is positively related to the four dimensions of career growth, with the correlation coefficient of career goal progress the highest ( $r = .61, p < .01$ ), followed by promotion speed ( $r = .49, p < .01$ ), remuneration growth ( $r = .47, p < .01$ ) and professional ability development ( $r = .43, p < .01$ ). Continuance commitment is positively related to each of the four dimensions of career growth with correlations ranging from  $r = .36$  for promotion speed and remuneration growth to  $r = .09$  ( $p < .05$ ) for professional ability development. Normative commitment is also positively related to all four dimensions of career growth with correlations with the strongest association being with promotion speed ( $r = .44, p < .01$ ), and the weakest with professional ability development ( $r = .23, p < .01$ ).

With respect to the control variables, gender is significantly related to remuneration growth ( $r = -.10, p < .05$ ) and normative commitment ( $r = -.03, p < .05$ ). The latter two associations likely reflect the pay disparity between men and women in China and the fact that women may feel less obligated to their employers as a result. Age is positively correlated with affective commitment ( $r = .10, p < .05$ ), while education is positively correlated with career goal progress ( $r = .17, p < .01$ ), professional ability development ( $r = .18, p < .01$ ), affective commitment ( $r = .10, p < .05$ ), and perceived opportunities ( $r = .17, p < .01$ ). Perceived

**Table 2**  
Results of correlation analysis.

	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1 Gender <sup>a</sup>	1.30	.46										
2 Age	29.11	7.54	-.05									
3 Education level <sup>b</sup>	2.32	.92	.06	.04								
4. Perceived opportunities	3.19	.66	-.06	-.00	.17**							
5 Career goal progress	3.30	.77	.00	-.02	.17**	.14**						
6 Professional ability development	3.67	.74	.04	.01	.18**	.16**	.45**					
7.Promotion speed	2.88	.84	-.01	-.01	.00	.13**	.34**	.33**				
8Remuneration growth	2.91	.88	-.10*	-.02	.02	.14**	.40**	.27**	.48**			
9Affective commitment	3.41	.72	.01	.10*	.10*	.23**	.61**	.43**	.49**	.47**		
10Continuance commitment	2.94	.75	-.08	.05	-.04	.01	.28**	.09*	.36**	.36**	.41**	
11Normative commitment	3.14	.73	-.03*	.09	.03	.11**	.39**	.23**	.44**	.39**	.45**	.47**

Notes: \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ ; a: 1—Male, 2—Female; b: 1—no college, 2—some college, 3—bachelors, 4—masters and above.

opportunities were significantly correlated with education, with each of the four career growth factors and to affective and normative organizational commitment, but not to continuance commitment. Given these associations, perceived opportunities and the demographic variables were used as controls in the remaining analyses.

### Regression analysis

Regression analysis was used to investigate the influence of career growth on each of the separate forms of organizational commitment. For each of the three forms of commitment, the control variables were entered in the first step. The career growth factors were subsequently entered into each model in steps two and three. Step 2 added the two aspects of career growth that deal with personal development, career goal progress and professional ability development, while step 3 added the degree to which organizations followed through with appropriate rewards, promotion speed and remuneration growth. Doing this allows us to assess the role of organizational reward follow-up on organizational commitment over and above that achieved through personal development activities. Finally, the two-way interactions among the four career growth factors were entered in step 4 to test the exploratory hypothesis that combining career growth factors can enhance organizational commitment. Table 3 shows the regression results using standardized beta coefficients.

**Table 3**  
Results of regression analysis.

	Independent variables	Equation 1	Equation 2	Equation 3
		Affective commitment	Continuance commitment	Normative commitment
		Beta	Beta	Beta
Step 1	Gender	.01	-.09	-.01
	Age	.09	.03	.08
	Education level	.09	-.07	.01
	Perceived opportunities	.22***	.03	.14**
	F	6.67***	1.61	2.40*
	R <sup>2</sup> (Adjusted R <sup>2</sup> )	.06 (.05)	.02 (.01)	.02 (.01)
Step 2	Gender	.02	-.08	-.00
	Age	.11**	.04	.09*
	Education level	-.05	-.13*	-.08
	Perceived opportunities	.11	-.01	.07
	Goal progress	.51***	.33**	.40***
	Ability development	.17***	-.02	.04
	F	45.74***	8.31***	15.06***
	ΔF	116.19***	21.40***	39.44***
		R <sup>2</sup> (Adjusted R <sup>2</sup> )	.41 (.40)	.11 (.10)
Step 3	Gender	.03	-.07	.01
	Age	.12**	.04	.09*
	Education level	-.02	-.09	-.04
	Perceived opportunities	.07	-.06	.02
	Goal progress	.37***	.16**	.22***
	Ability development	.16***	-.02	.03
	Promotion speed	.16**	.15*	.24***
	Remuneration growth	.14**	.22***	.13*
	F	42.18***	11.77***	18.21***
	ΔF	19.02***	19.78***	22.72***
		R <sup>2</sup> (Adjusted R <sup>2</sup> )	.46 (.45)	.19 (.18)
Step 4	Gender	.02	-.07	-.01
	Age	.11**	.04	.09
	Education level	-.03	-.08	-.04
	Perceived opportunities	.06	-.09	.00
	Goal progress	.40***	.20**	.25***
	Ability development	.16***	-.05	.04
	Promotion speed	.14**	.23***	.15*
	Remuneration growth	.15**	.17**	.24***
	GP×AD	.02	-.12	-.11
	GP×PS	.17*	.15	.22*
	GP×RG	-.05	-.07	-.08
	AD×PS	.10	.03	.25**
	AD×RG	-.11	.01	-.12
	PS×RG	-.06	.10	-.05
	F	25.12***	7.75***	12.21***
	ΔF	1.74	2.13*	3.35**
		R <sup>2</sup> (Adjusted R <sup>2</sup> )	.48 (.46)	.22 (.19)

Notes: \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

### *Affective commitment as the dependent variable*

Equation 1 shows the results of the regression analysis involving affective organizational commitment. Entering the control variables in step 1 had a significant effect on affective commitment ( $R^2 = .06$ ;  $F = 6.67$ ,  $p < .001$ ), primarily as a result of the effect of perceived opportunity ( $\beta = .22$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Results of step 2 shows that entering career growth progress and professional ability development adds significantly to the model ( $R^2 = .41$ ;  $\Delta F = 116.19$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Career goal progress had the greatest effect ( $\beta = .51$ ,  $p < .001$ ), followed by professional ability development ( $\beta = .17$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Adding the career growth dimensions that focus on the organization's rewards also adds significantly to the model as shown in step 3 ( $R^2 = .46$ ;  $\Delta F = 19.02$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Both promotion speed ( $\beta = .16$ ,  $p < .01$ ), and remuneration growth ( $\beta = .14$ ,  $p < .01$ ) were positively associated with affective organizational commitment. The four components of career growth explain 40% of the variance in affective commitment over that explained by the control variables. These results support hypotheses H1a through H1d.

Step 4 shows that adding the two-way interactions among the four career growth factors did not add significantly to the model ( $R^2 = .48$ ;  $\Delta F = 1.74$ , ns), as the only significant interaction was “career goal progress by promotion speed” ( $\beta = .17$ ,  $p < .05$ ). Consequently, no support exists for Hypothesis 4 in terms of the interaction effects for career growth factors on affective organizational commitment.

### *Continuance commitment as the dependent variable*

The same procedure outlined above was used to examine the effects of career growth and perceived opportunities on continuance commitment. None of the control variables are significant predictors of continuance commitment. The results of step 2 shows that the addition of career goal progress and professional ability development adds significantly to the model ( $R^2 = .11$ ;  $\Delta F = 21.40$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Career goal progress is positively associated with continuance commitment ( $\beta = .33$ ,  $p < .001$ ), while education level was negatively related to continuance commitment ( $\beta = -.13$ ,  $p < .01$ ). The addition of the remaining career goal factors, promotion speed and remuneration growth in step 3, also adds significantly to the model ( $R^2 = .19$ ;  $\Delta F = 19.78$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Remuneration growth had the largest association with continuance commitment in this step ( $\beta = .22$ ,  $p < .001$ ), followed by career goal progress ( $\beta = .16$ ,  $p < .01$ ), and promotion speed ( $\beta = .15$ ,  $p < .05$ ). The effect of professional ability development is not a significant predictor of continuance commitment. Therefore, only H2a, H2c and H2d are supported.

The addition of the two-way interaction effects in step 4 produced no significant effects on continuance commitment. Therefore, no support exists for Hypothesis 4 in terms of the interaction of career growth factors on continuance organizational commitment.

### *Normative commitment as the dependent variable*

Entering the control variables in step 1 had a significant effect on normative commitment ( $R^2 = .02$ ;  $F = 2.40$ ,  $p < .05$ ), with perceived opportunities being the lone significant predictor ( $\beta = .14$ ,  $p < .01$ ). The addition of career goal progress and professional ability development in step 2 added significantly to the model ( $R^2 = .19$ ;  $\Delta F = 39.44$ ,  $p < .001$ ), due solely to the presence of career goal progress ( $\beta = .40$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Entering promotion speed and remuneration growth in step 3 also adds significantly to the model ( $R^2 = .27$ ;  $\Delta F = 22.72$ ,  $p < .001$ ). In this step, three of the four career growth factors are significant predictors of normative commitment, with promotion speed having the largest effect ( $\beta = .24$ ,  $p < .001$ ), followed by career goal progress ( $\beta = .22$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and remuneration growth ( $\beta = .13$ ,  $p < .05$ ). These findings support hypotheses H3a, H3c and H3d but not H3b.

Entering the two-way interactions among the four career growth factors in step 4 adds significantly to the prediction of normative commitment ( $R^2 = .31$ ;  $\Delta F = 3.35$ ,  $p < .01$ ). The interactions of “career goal progress by promotion speed” ( $\beta = .22$ ,  $p < .05$ ) and “professional ability development by promotion speed” ( $\beta = .25$ ,  $p < .01$ ) contributed to this effect. While this finding suggests that the combination of career goal factors has some added effect on normative commitment, the fact that only two of the six possible two-way interactions were significant, coupled with the observation of only one significant two-way interaction finding on the other two forms of commitment, suggests that the four career growth factors affect the various forms of organizational commitment in an additive not a multiplicative manner. Therefore little support exists for Hypothesis 4.

## **Discussion**

### *The effect of career growth on organizational commitment*

The results of this study provide strong support for the use of the Meyer and Allen (1997) three component model of commitment in China and for the effects of career growth on organizational commitment. Specifically, all four forms of career growth, career goal progress, professional ability development, promotion speed and remuneration growth, positively influenced affective organizational commitment. This is consistent with Meyer and Herscovitch (2001) finding that affective commitment is a function of employees' perception of how their work is valued and their task identity. It also supports early work by Ogilvie (1986) showing a high correlation between pay level and affective commitment and Rhoades, Eisenberger and Armeli (2001) who found promotion practices and training and development to be determinants of affective commitment.

With the exception of professional ability development, the use of career growth factors as HR practices has implications for the remaining two forms of commitment, as suggested by Meyer and Allen (1997). That is, the career growth factors of career goal progress, promotion speed and remuneration growth were found to be related to both continuance and normative commitment, in addition to affective commitment. This suggests that these three factors are effective means of building up side bets and norms of reciprocity, making leaving the organization both more costly and morally problematic for employees. It also is consistent with

Shouksmith's (1994) finding that promotional opportunities are an important predictor of continuance commitment. The fact that professional ability development was related to affective commitment but not to continuance or normative commitment suggests that the development of employees' professional abilities may help them identify with the goals and values of the organization, thus building affective commitment. However, employees may see these abilities as transferrable and the organization's willingness to develop them as a normal business activity, which explains the lack of a connection between professional ability development and continuance and normative commitment, respectively.

A significant finding in this study is the fact that organizations need to do more than simply develop their human resources through providing jobs and experiences that allow employees to accomplish their career goals and develop their professional abilities. While doing so will enhance affective commitment and to a lesser degree continuance and normative commitment, organizations that are also able to follow-up and develop reward structures that reinforce these activities are able to leverage all three forms of commitment.

The lack of a significant number of interaction effects among the various factors of career growth suggests that career growth progress, professional ability development, promotion speed, and remuneration growth have separate, additive effects on organizational commitment rather than multiplicative effects. More practically speaking, each of these career growth factors plays an important and unique role in enhancing organizational commitment.

Finally, it is also interesting to note that, while perceived opportunities were a significant predictor of both affective and normative commitment, its effect was negated by the presence of career growth factors. This suggests that, in China at least, what an organization does for its employees in terms of career growth is independent of the marketplace.

### *Managerial implications*

Meyer and Allen (1997) suggested that HR practices could be used to manage commitment. While they identified promotion and compensation as key factors in securing organizational commitment, they focused more on recruitment, socialization, assessment, and benefits practices as promising vehicles for building commitment among employees. Our study suggests that career growth is a viable subset of practices that should be considered by managers seeking to build a committed workforce. It may be particularly useful in that many commitment enhancing strategies have been directed toward newcomers rather than longer-term employees. Career growth may be a very viable way for managers to maintain or perhaps re-establish organizational commitment after difficult periods in an organization's history (e.g., layoffs, restructuring).

Because career goal progress is linked to all three forms of commitment, managers would be advised to consider employee career goals during the recruitment, selection and placement processes. Doing so would enable them to place a candidate into the position that best fits into his/her career goals. Conversely, should any employees not have clearly developed career goals, helping them develop one could pay dividends later on. Moreover developing employee professional skills and abilities is vital not simply to promote affective commitment but to meeting the needs of the employee and organization alike. This study also suggests that employers, who back up their HR practices with a reward system that recognizes the worth and contribution of employees to the organization, build additional commitment from their employees. Employees who are reinforced through promotions and pay raises identify more with their employers' goals, find it harder to leave their organizations and develop a moral bond with their employers.

### *Limitations and future research*

As is common in survey research, data are cross-sectional and self-report (i.e., subject to common method error variance). Common method bias can work in either direction, however. That is, it can either attenuate or inflate correlations among variables, so one should not automatically assume inflated relationships (Spector, 2006). In addition, Meyer and Allen's (1997) continuance commitment scale has two items ("One of the few negative consequences of leaving this organization would be the scarcity of available alternatives." "I believe I have too few options to consider leaving this organization.") that overlap with the concept of perceived opportunities. This was mitigated somewhat in this study by positioning the six continuance commitment items together and asking subjects to think about these items in terms of their cost of leaving the organization. Priming respondents to think in terms of the cost of leaving rather than perceived alternatives resulted in the two measures being uncorrelated with one another ( $r = .01$ ). An additional limitation involves the nature of the sample. These data come solely from the large, developed cities of China, so there is no guarantee that these results are generalizable to other regions within or outside of China. Finally, there is no guaranty that the four factors utilized in this study to capture career growth are all-inclusive measures of this concept. Future research should focus on the further articulation of this concept and its measurement.

With so little research on the relationship between career growth and organizational commitment, this area is ripe for future research. Among potential topics is the notion of how career growth interacts with other determinants of organizational commitment, such as person–job fit, job design, leadership style, etc., and the role played by individual differences in the career growth–organizational commitment relationship. Moreover, of interest is whether career growth predicts other outcomes directly, such as organizational citizenship behaviors, turnover intentions, and performance.

This study demonstrates that the three component model of commitment is not a uniquely American phenomenon and supports the work of Chay and Aryee (1999) and Aryee and Chen (2004) showing the importance of career growth in a collectivistic culture. However, it begs the questions of what other factors, particularly those related to cultural differences, moderate the relationship between career growth and organizational commitment. For example, in China commitment to family is

a strong cultural value (Li, 2007). It would be interesting to examine whether familial ties enhance or interfere with building organizational commitment through career growth.

In conclusion, management is often defined as the utilization of organizational resources in order to accomplish organizational goals efficiently and effectively. This study reinforces the idea that if individuals can achieve their own personal goals and are reinforced by the organization for doing so, they will be more committed to accomplishing the goals of the organization to which they belong.

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