

EXPLORING ORGANIZATIONAL COMMITMENT IN A POST-COVID ERA: A STUDY IN CUSTOMER CONTACT CENTRES IN PORTUGAL¹

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SUBMISSION HISTORY

RECEIVED: 02/09/2023

ACCEPTED: 04/12/2023

PUBLISHED: 07/12/2023

CITATION: SAMAGAIO, A.; NOGUEIRA, M.; SEVERINO, T. (2023). EXPLORING ORGANIZATIONAL COMMITMENT IN A POST-COVID ERA: A STUDY IN CUSTOMER CONTACT CENTRES IN PORTUGAL. *MANAGEMENT IN REVIEW*. 1 (1), 51-60. DOI:

ABSTRACT :

Studies carried out in contact centres present worrying results in relation to the organizational commitment of their employees, which leads to high levels of absenteeism and turnover. However, the covid 19 pandemic demanded physical and social distancing for workers, which led to companies recommending flexible work models. These changes contributed to a strong growth in teleworking and hybrid models, which have been debated in the literature as generators of employees' greater satisfaction and organizational commitment. In this sense, this study aims at exploring the level of organizational commitment (affective, calculative and normative) in the contact centre sector in the post- -pandemic period, in which hybrid work models gained greater importance and to analyse the relationship between these three levels of commitment and age and seniority. A quantitative methodological approach was employed through a questionnaire survey applied to a sample of 400 respondents. Findings allowed to conclude that the level of organizational commitment in the three dimensions is similar among workers in the contact centre industry soon after the pandemic period, and positive correlations were found between affective commitment and normative commitment, as well as between calculative and affective commitment. Furthermore, findings demonstrated that levels of organizational commitment vary according to age groups. Regarding seniority, the three levels of commitment are higher for employees who work at the company for 2-3 years.

KEYWORDS: ORGANIZATIONAL COMMITMENT, AFFECTIVE COMMITMENT, NORMATIVE COMMITMENT, CALCULATIVE COMMITMENT, WORK FLEXIBILITY, CONTACT CENTRE, SENIORITY, AGE

1 INTRODUCTION

The onset of Covid 19, in 2020, required companies to quickly organize and adapt to comply with the social distancing policy and thus protect workers from the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic. The use of flexible working models thus showed substantial growth, as a result of the demands of the pandemic period. Previous studies had already revealed that flexible work models tend to lead to greater employee commitment and satisfaction (Perry et al. (2018). However, studies carried

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out in contact centres present worrying results in relation to the organizational commitment of their employees, since the worker's affective base, in the long term, can diminish or even jeopardize personal and organizational interests (Paiva et al., 2015). There are several challenges in this sector of activity, namely high levels of dissatisfaction and demotivation of workers, which lead to high levels of absenteeism and turnover and consequently, high costs of recruitment and training new employees (Moreira et al., 2015). Oliveira et al. (2018) also adds that in addition to the aforementioned tangible costs, turnover can cause intangible costs such as loss of knowledge, decreased productivity and loss of connection with suppliers and customers.

In this sense, this study sought to investigate organizational commitment in the contact centre sector, in the post- -pandemic period, in which hybrid work models gained greater importance. The main goal of this investigation therefore consists of characterizing contact centre employees, in Portugal, in relation to their level of organizational commitment in its three dimensions (affective, calculative and normative). Based on a survey of 400 employees of contact centres from different contexts (e.g. telecommunications, technology, banking) the relationship between the age of employees and their levels of organizational commitment and the relationship between the seniority of employees and their levels of organizational commitment were also explored, in the three aforementioned dimensions.

The article is structured as follows: the following section will be dedicated to the literature review and the methodological justifications implemented in this research. Next, section four will present the analysis and discussion of the research results, and in the last section the main conclusions of the study will be presented, as well as suggestions for future research and limitations of the study.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

This section is divided in two main topics. It starts by providing a synthetic review on the evolution of the contact centres and its challenges, which is followed by the most relevant literature on organizational commitment in its three dimensions: affective, cognitive and normative.

2.1 Evolution of the Contact Centre concept and its main challenges

Contact centres are multichannel service centres that offer customers a support service and function as a form of interface between the company and the customer (Andrade et al., 2020). These service centres represent great relevance in the global economy. The growth of this business area is strongly related to the evolution of the services sector and the adoption of new information technologies in the last decades. The predominance of contact centres has been attributed to the benefits that companies derive from their use, particularly in terms of increasing the possibility to better manage relationships with their customers and reducing the costs of this service (Chambel & Castanheira, 2010).

The concept of employment associated with the contact centre appeared in 1880 and was called telesales. Later in 1980, with the development of social communication and the success obtained in the sale of products and services, the concept changed to telemarketing and eighteen years later to call centre (Mancini, 2006). Call centres are service centres that allow companies to publicize and promote sales of new products in the market and allow customers to clarify issues with the company (Sobral et al., 2019). Technological development has given rise to new forms of contact such as email, online chat, social networks, among others, and thus the transformation of call centres into contact centres (Saberri et al., 2017). In this sense, Saberri et al. (2017) define contact centre (CC) as a service centre where service operators communicate with customers through various means of communication, through technologies and tools that allow the integration of customized data and knowledge.

Although CC activities are recent, they are equated with Taylorist work models (Costa & Costa, 2018). The division of labour and the specialization of the function translates mostly into short, repetitive and routine calls. Workers have little control over the distribution of the amount of work since calls are distributed automatically through specific software (Chambel & Castanheira, 2010) and they are pressured to achieve goals and results individually (Costa & Costa, 2018). Dasic and Kostic-stankovic (2015) emphasized that working in CC is not easy,

because it often involves interacting with difficult customers, requires good communication skills, in-depth knowledge of the products that customers are looking for and dexterity in handling equipment. These characteristics of the CC activity originate a high pressure that causes wear, not only on a physical but also on a psychological level, leading to problems of attachment and identification with the function (Ziliotto & Oliveira, 2014). In this way, there are several challenges in this sector of activity, namely the concern with the levels of dissatisfaction and demotivation of workers that lead to high levels of absenteeism and turnover (Moreira et al., 2015). A variable that has been the subject of study to understand the high turnover rate in this CC activity and the precariousness at work is the worker's commitment to the organization (Costa & Costa, 2018). In general, studies have shown that there is a low level of commitment on the part of CC assistants (Paiva et al., 2015). It is therefore important to clarify the concept of organizational commitment, which is further explored in the following section.

2.2 Organizational Commitment

The concept of organizational commitment emerged through Becker's study in 1960 and since then, a massive amount of research and literature emerged about the topic. Becker's theory (1960) set the idea that commitment is an explanation of consistent human behaviour, based on the concept of side-bets. This concept of "parallel exchanges" is associated with the fact that the employee makes an investment (time, money, effort) in an organization, which he considers to be something valuable and which he could lose if he leaves it. The author concludes that the level of commitment will be directly proportional to the investment made by the worker in the organization (Becker, 1960). Later on, in 1990, Meyer and Allen defined the concept of organizational commitment (OC) as a psychological state that links the worker to the organization and through which their desire to remain in the organization is developed.

The authors identified three dimensions of organisational commitment: Affective, Continuance and Normative Commitment. Briefly, the authors suggested that the first dimension – affective commitment – is related to employees' emotional attachment to the organisation, that is to say, is related to the identification and emotional connection that the employee develops with the organization and is defined by the option to remain committed to it. The second dimension – continuance commitment – is associated with employees' perceived costs with leaving an organization. Also recognised as calculative, continuance commitment is related to the employee's decision to remain in the organization because of the fear of losing the benefits already acquired. The final dimension – normative commitment – is related with employees perceived moral obligation to remain with the organisation (Meyer & Allen, 1990).

Although these three dimensions are associated with employees' positions regarding remaining in their organizations, the nature of the employee-organisation involvement may depend on which type of commitment is most predominant (Allen & Meyer, 2000). Meyer et al (2002) sought to investigate the strength and correlations between the three forms of commitment in this three-dimensional model and found that the three forms of commitment are related, but distinguishable from each other. Both Meyer and Allen (1991) and Nascimento et al. (2008), report in their studies, positive correlations between affective commitment and normative commitment and the absence of a relationship between calculative commitment and affective commitment. In turn, Sheikh (2017) concluded that commitment to the organization was influenced by a series of factors such as: age, length of service, gender, marital status and work-related factors. Also, Nascimento et al. (2008) analysed the relationship between age and seniority and organizational commitment. Regarding age, they found that the correlation between normative and affective commitment tends to be attenuated with increasing age and that calculative commitment tends to be stronger with increasing age. The same is true for the seniority variable. Contrary to the results of Meyer et al. (2002), Nascimento et al (2008) demonstrated, then, that there is an influence of demographic variables, age and seniority regarding the three dimensions of organizational commitment. It is expected, therefore, that the present study will also contribute to clarify these contradictory results. The next section explains the methodological decisions taken in this regard.

3 METHODOLOGICAL DECISIONS AND RESEARCH HYPOTHESES

This study adopted a quantitative approach. Data were collected using the questionnaire survey technique and analysed with the support of the software SPSS v.28 (Statistical Package for the Social Science). Table 1 summarizes the methodology employed.

Table 1. Research methodology

Unit of analysis	Individual (individuals working in different functions in the contact centre area)
Target group	Contact centres employees
Tool for data collection	Survey
Geographical setting	National – Portugal
Sample	400 valid responses
Period of Data collection	April to June 2022
Scales used	Organizational commitment was measured using the scales by Meyer et al. (1993) and Meyer and Allen (1991, 1997), translated and validated for the Portuguese population by Nascimento et al. (2008).
Data analysis techniques	Descriptive analysis and comparison of means, Alpha Cronbach to verify the internal consistency of scales and correlations.
Software	SPSS v.28 (Statistical Package for the Social Science).

Data analysis will be presented in 3 sections. The first section describes the socio-demographic characterization of the sample, the second section presents the validation of the scales used in this study and the third and last section reports on the validation of the hypotheses under study. These were formulated, based on the literature, and propose: a) characterizing CC employees in terms of their level of organizational commitment in the three dimensions presented, and b) analysing its relationship with the age and seniority of employees. Seven research hypotheses are then proposed, summarized in Table 2.

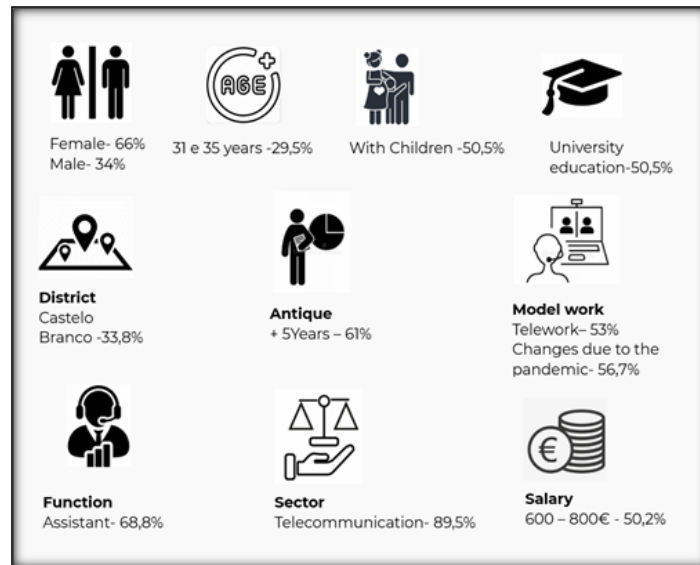
Table 2. Research hypotheses

Hypothesis identification	Formulation of the Hypothesis
Hypothesis 1	The level of organizational commitment in the three dimensions is similar among workers in the contact centre industry
Hypothesis 2	There is a positive relationship between affective commitment and normative commitment.
Hypothesis 3	Affective commitment is not related to calculative commitment.
Hypothesis 4	There is a negative relationship between age and normative commitment and affective commitment.
Hypothesis 5	There is a positive relationship between age and calculative commitment.
Hypothesis 6	There is a negative relationship between seniority and normative commitment and affective commitment.
Hypothesis 7	There is a positive relationship between seniority and calculative commitment.

3.1 Sample characterization

This research employed a non-probabilistic convenience sample of 400 contact centre employees in Portugal. The majority of participants are women (66%), the most represented age group is between 31 and 35 years old (29.5%), and 50.5% have children. 46.8% of respondents have university education and 50.2% earn between 600 and 800 euros. Most respondents have been with the organization for more than 5 years (61%) and 53% of respondents are teleworking. Of the total sample, 56.7% switched to this regime due to the pandemic. In relation to the functions and sector of activity, 68.8% are assistants and the most represented sector is telecommunications (89.5%).

Figure 1. Sample characterization



4 FINDINGS

4.1 Validity and reliability of measurements

To test the research hypotheses, it was necessary to analyse the organizational commitment scale, in order to guarantee its unidimensionality and consequently, the validity of the study. In this context, initially the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) test was carried out to understand whether the study sample was suitable for factor analysis. Subsequently, the analysis of the adequacy of the factor analysis required the Bartlett sphericity test to be carried out. This test allowed us to check whether the correlation matrix was an identity matrix. Thus, if the significance level is greater than 0.05, there are no correlations between the variables. On the contrary, if the significance level presents a value below 0.05, there are correlations between the variables. The items used in the organizational commitment construct were measured using a 5-point Likert scale, where 1=totally disagree, 2=disagree; 3=indifferent (neutral), 4=agree and 5=strongly agree. Tables 3 showcases results regarding factor analysis and reliability.

Table 3. Factor Analysis and Reliability

	KMO	Bartlett's test	%Explained variance	Communalities	Cronbach's alpha	Number of items
Organizational commitment scale	0,909	0,000	61,047	Between 0,448 e 0,777	0,897	19

Subsequently, an exploratory factor analysis with varimax rotation was carried out on the instrument (19 items), and as shown in Table 4, there are three explanatory factors of organizational commitment, together explaining 61.05% of the total variance of the results, and that the 19 items are allocated according to the theoretical framework, both criteria meeting the recommendations of Meyer and Allen (1991).

The round matrix of factors, presented in table 5, is divided into 3 factors. Factor I included items 2, 6, 7, 9, 10, 11 and 15 belonging to the affective commitment scale, factor II included items 4, 5, 8, 12, 18 and 19 belonging to the normative commitment scale and finally factor III which included items 1, 3, 13, 14, 16 and 17 belonging to the calculative commitment scale. These 3 factors represent organizational commitment in its three dimensions.

Table 4. Factor analysis with varimax rotation

Items	Communality	Factor 1: Affective	Factor 2: Normative	Factor 3: Calculative
2_ [I do not feel "emotionally attached" to this company.]	0,764	0,86	0,143	-0,07
6_ [This company has great personal meaning for me.]	0,716	0,779	0,324	0,065
7_ [I don't feel like "part of the family" at this company.]	0,698	0,822	0,136	-0,053
9_ [I feel this company's problems as if they were my own.]	0,473	0,626	0,278	0,056
11_ [I would be very happy to spend the rest of my career with this company.]	0,633	0,653	0,43	0,149
15_ [I don't feel like I'm part of this company.]	0,694	0,822	0,134	-0,032
10_ [This company deserves my loyalty.]	0,638	0,649	0,462	0,054
4_ [I would not leave this company at this time because I feel I have a personal obligation to the people who work here.]	0,670	0,311	0,75	0,108
5_ [I feel like I have no moral duty to stay at the company I currently work at.]	0,486	0,439	0,541	-0,002
8_ [Even if it would be an advantage for me, I feel it would not be right to leave this company at this time.]	0,777	0,229	0,838	0,152
12_ [I would feel guilty if I left this company now.]	0,733	0,175	0,83	0,114
18_ [I feel like I have a great duty to this company.]	0,684	0,563	0,596	0,105
19_ [As I have already given so much to this company, I am not currently considering the possibility of working for another company.]	0,557	0,364	0,527	0,383
1_ [I believe that there are very few alternatives to be able to think about leaving this company.]	0,451	-0,067	0,044	0,666
3_ [It would be very financially penalizing to leave this company at this time, even if I could do so.]	0,579	0,057	0,218	0,726
13_ [One of the main reasons for me continuing to work for this company is that leaving would require considerable personal sacrifice.]	0,465	-0,046	0,218	0,644
14_ [Right now, staying with this company is as much a matter of financial need as it is of personal will.]	0,448	0,353	0,207	0,53
16_ [One of the negative consequences for me if I left this company is the scarcity of job alternatives I would have available.]	0,585	-0,091	-0,149	0,745
17_ [A lot of my life would be affected if I decided to leave this company at this time.]	0,550	0,065	0,047	0,737
Cronbach's alpha		0,895	0,883	0,785

Therefore, the authors' conceptual model is confirmed. However, item 10 was assigned as belonging to the affective commitment subscale and item 19 assigned to the normative commitment subscale. Still, it was decided to keep both items in the subscales defined by the authors, that is, normative and calculative commitment, respectively. After factor analysis, the internal consistency of each of the subscales was analysed by calculating Cronbach's Alpha. For affective commitment, an alpha of 0.90 was obtained, for normative commitment an alpha of 0.88 and for calculative commitment an alpha of 0.79. Table 5 compares the Cronbach's alphas of the model validated for the Portuguese context by Nascimento et al. (2008) and by the authors Meyer & Allen (1997) and Meyer et al (2002) with the present study.

Table 5. Internal consistency analysis - Cronbach's Alpha

Authors	Affective Commitment	Normative Commitment	Calculative Commitment
Meyer & Allen, 1997	0,85	0,73	0,79
Meyer et al., 2002	0,82	0,73	0,76
Nascimento et al. 2008	0,91	0,84	0,79
Present study	0,90	0,88	0,79

4.2 Validation of hypotheses

Table 6 shows that the three levels of organizational commitment have similar means between them, but the level of affective commitment has the highest value (mean = 3.30), followed by calculative commitment (mean = 3.21) and normative commitment with the lowest mean (mean = 2.67). Thus, H1 is confirmed, since the three levels of organizational commitment presented a similar mean between them.

Table 6. Components of Organizational Commitment – Mean

		Affective Commitment	Calculative Commitment	Normative Commitment
N	Valid	400	400	400
Mean	0,82	3,2954	3,2104	2,6699

To understand the association between levels of organizational commitment, assess the relationship between its dimensions and the age and seniority of contact centre employees and with the purpose of testing hypotheses 2, 3, 4, 5, 6 and 7, we used if the Spearman correlation coefficient (Table 7).

After comparing the means, Pearson's assumptions were validated and it was found that there is a non-linear relationship between the variables, because the classes are not metric variables, but ordinal. The results corroborate the studies by Meyer and Allen (1991) and Nascimento et al. (2008), where there are positive correlations between affective commitment and normative commitment. Hence, H2 is confirmed. However, although the authors refer to the absence of a relationship between calculative commitment and affective commitment, in the present study there is a correlation, albeit weak, and thus H3 is rejected.

Regarding, age and seniority in the company, the three dimensions of organizational commitment present weak correlations with the variables age and seniority, verifying a negative direction between age and calculative commitment and seniority with the calculative and normative dimensions. H4, H5, H6 AND H7 are therefore rejected.

Table 7. Correlations

		Correlations			
			Affective Commitment	Calculative Commitment	Normative Commitment
Spearman's rho	Affective Commitment	Correlation Coefficient	1,000	,189**	,681**
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.	,000	,000
		N	400	400	400
	Calculative Commitment	Correlation Coefficient	,189**	1,000	,326**
		Sig. (2-tailed)	,000	.	,000
		N	400	400	400
	Normative Commitment	Correlation Coefficient	,681**	,326**	1,000
		Sig. (2-tailed)	,000	,000	.
		N	400	400	400
	Age	Correlation Coefficient	,181**	-,065	,015
		Sig. (2-tailed)	,000	,197	,766
		N	400	400	400
Seniority	Correlation Coefficient	,012	-,038	-,100*	
	Sig. (2-tailed)	,807	,444	,045	
	N	400	400	400	
**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).					
*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).					

To verify the relationship between the three dimensions of organizational commitment and age, we used a comparison between means to analyse in which age groups the levels of commitment are higher or lower. Table 8 shows that affective commitment tends to increase with advancing age, except for the age group of 41 to 45 years old, which shows a slight decrease when compared to the previous group. In turn, calculative commitment reaches a higher value in the age group between 20 to 25 years old, and from the 26 to 30 age group, it decreases as age increases. Lastly, normative commitment is lower in the age group of 26 to 30 years old, and the means tend to fluctuate with increases and decreases, in the remaining groups.

Table 8. Analysis of commitment levels with age

Age		≤19	20-25	26-30	31-35	36-40	41-45	+45
	N	2	20	57	118	64	89	50
Affective Commitment	Mean	2,42	2,92	3,05	3,25	3,37	3,31	3,77
Calculative Commitment	Mean	3,00	3,43	3,27	3,22	3,24	3,13	3,16
Normative Commitment	Mean	2,58	2,67	2,56	2,66	2,83	2,63	2,65

Regarding the relationship between the three dimensions of organizational commitment and seniority, table 9 reveals the three dimensions of organizational commitment present higher means for employees with seniority between 2 and 3 years and lower for employees that work in the organisation for less than 6 months.

Table 9. Analysis of levels of commitment to seniority

Seniority		Less than 6 months	6 months - 1 year	1-2 years	2 – 3 years	3 -5 years	> 5 years
	N	9	13	48	35	51	244
Affective Commitment	Mean	3,02	3,26	3,15	3,72	3,05	3,33
Calculative Commitment	Mean	3,17	3,14	3,10	3,54	3,20	3,19
Normative Commitment	Mean	2,48	2,82	2,64	3,20	2,62	2,60

5 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The main goal of this research was to explore employees' level of organizational commitment while working in flexible working models, in the particular context of contact centres. Moreover, we aimed at understanding the relationship between the three levels of commitment – affective, normative and calculative – with age and seniority, thus complementing existing, but contradictory findings, found in previous literature.

Findings revealed that the level of organizational commitment in the three dimensions is similar among workers in contact centres and positive correlations were found between affective commitment and normative commitment, as well as between calculative and affective commitment. Thus, our results corroborate the studies by Meyer and Allen (1991) and Nascimento et al. (2008), according to which there are positive correlations between affective commitment and normative commitment. However, although the authors refer to the absence of a relationship between calculative commitment and affective commitment, this study revealed a correlation, albeit weak.

Regarding seniority, the three levels of commitment are higher for employees who work at the company for 2-3 years. Regarding the relationship between commitment, age and seniority, our findings go in line with Sheikh (2017) and Nascimento et al. (2008) conclusions, whereby commitment to the organization was influenced by a series of factors such as: age, length of service, gender, marital status and work-related factors. Our findings demonstrated that levels of organizational commitment vary according to age groups, with emphasis on the 36 to 40 age group, as the group with higher levels of affective and normative commitment. Nevertheless, our findings also contradict the results of Meyer et al. (2002), in the sense that it demonstrates that there is an influence on the demographic variables, age and seniority in relation to the three dimensions of organizational commitment. About hypotheses six and seven proposed by Nascimento et al (2008), related to seniority, and similarly to age, results revealed that the three dimensions of organizational commitment also present weak relationships, with a negative direction in the calculative and normative dimensions and a positive direction in the affective dimension. Hence, our data suggests that commitment in the three dimensions presents fluctuations in average values, which contradicts the results of the study by Nascimento et al. (2008).

Concerning turnover, the present study found that turnover intentions are the same for flexible and non-flexible work models, thus challenging what was evidenced by O'Brien and Aliabadi (2020) that work model options do not influence turnover. On the other hand, results corroborate Meyer's et al. (2002) conclusion that the three forms of commitment are negatively related to turnover, and that affective commitment showed strong correlations.

As limitations of the study, two fundamentally stand out. Firstly, despite being a reasonably sized sample, the non-probabilistic sampling technique does not allow generalizing the results to the population of call centre employees in Portugal. Secondly, one cannot ignore the fact that the telecommunications sector represents almost 90% of the sample. Hence, for future research, it would be important to replicate this study with more heterogeneous samples including more diverse sectors of activity. It would also be interesting to replicate this study in an environment with less uncertainty and volatility, since data was collected soon after the pandemic period, in which flexible working models began to be implemented as a rule, and not as an exception demanded by the pandemic.

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