

# WORKFORCE COMMITMENT IN AN INTERNATIONAL ORGANISATION IN THE HEALTH SECTOR

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The aim of the study was to explore the factors within an international medical organisation that could be utilized to increase employee commitment. Two questionnaires were utilized as measuring instruments on a stratified random sample of employees at all levels within the organisation. The results show that the most influential organisation commitment driver factors or categories within the organisation were rewards and affiliation. When evaluating the perceptions of employees of the organisation's workplace commitment practices, it was evident that the organisation was not meeting its employees' expectations.

In general, the employees are moderately committed to their employer. A significant percentage (33 per cent) reported extreme levels of commitment, while a small percentage (12 per cent) reported low levels of commitment.

*Key phrases: Commitment, commitment culture, employee commitment, organisation commitment, commitment driver factors, workplace commitment practices*

## INTRODUCTION

Replacing departing employees has become an ongoing practice for all organisations. How to slow down this exodus has possibly become one of the main issues in human resource management, due to the fact that the turnover rates created thereby are extremely expensive (Boyd 1992; Wickens 1998). As employee replacement costs continue to rise, finding and keeping the right employees is becoming vital to organisational success (Pascarella & Frohman 1989).

In a business environment where employee shortages are expected to increase beyond current levels, maintaining a committed workforce is a strong advantage. According to Gallie & White (1993) and Popplewell *et al* (1988), committed employees provide the following to the organisation:

- Asset value of a stable, dedicated workforce.
- Lower employee recruitment, training and development costs.
- Retention of employees with knowledge, skills and abilities that are critical to organisational success.
- Improved company/organisation image within the community.

In addition, a committed workforce influences customer loyalty. Loyal customers provide an organisation with the following (Ghemawat 1991):

- Asset value of a stable, predictable customer base
- Insurance for business downturns.

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- Long-term, highly profitable relationships.
  - Increased number of referrals to new customers.
  - Lower customer acquisition costs.

Without a skilful and dedicated workforce, no competitive advantage can be obtained (De Waal 2001; Meyer *et al* 1997).

As the average South African worker becomes more independent, educated and entrepreneurial, the relationship between employer and employee must evolve (De Waal 2001). The old "social contract" between the mentioned two parties has become a casualty in the transition from an industrial society to the information age (Human 1997). The new social contract has deflated overall workforce commitment (Dockel 2003). Under the previous social contract, employees were expected to remain with an organisation for life, or at least over the long term. In return for this commitment, employees were rewarded with regular promotions, increasing perks, a pension and increasing salaries and benefits. However, the escalation in downsizing, rightsizing, acquisitions, mergers and streamlining has taught employees that the traditional work-for-life model no longer exists (O'Malley 2000). In fact, it is estimated that those entering the workplace since the late 1990's will change employment an average of nine times before they reach the age of thirty two (America at Work Research Report 1999).

As the nature of organisational life has changed, so has the nature of the workforce upon which corporate success must rely. Compared to the past, a greater number of South African workers work as sub-contractors, work part-time, own businesses or are employed by small companies (Dockel 2003). In addition, the South African workforce has become more diverse as the number of females and minorities have been steadily increasing over the last decade (Human 1997).

These business and societal trends, accompanied with changes in the workforce, have left organisation leadership with new questions/challenges about establishing and increasing workforce commitment. According to Brewer (1993) and Dessler (1993), some of these challenges are:

- What is the level of workforce commitment in the organisation.
- How is workforce commitment changing.
- What are the behavioural indicators of a committed workforce.
- How important are compensation practices and benefit packages in retaining a committed workforce.

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- What steps can an organisation take to help improve workforce commitment.
  - Can a "mutual commitment culture" be created by focusing on what drives commitment.

Managing in an uncertain economic environment is a balancing act that involves maintaining staff morale, motivation and production, as well as keeping a keen eye on the so-called bottom line. Employees recognise organisational leaders for their business acumen and commitment to customers and shareholders. However, according to studies like the America at Work Research Report (2002), one in five respondents/employees described themselves as under-evaluated and believed that their leaders did not set the tone for an open organisation culture, promote a sense of spirit and pride, or demonstrated a real interest in the welfare and satisfaction of their employees. According to the America at Work Research Report (2002), successful organisational leaders will restore employee trust, create spirit and pride and build employee commitment by creating an energizing work environment that has the following characteristics:

- It is safe and secure.
- It encourages and rewards hard work by linking employee success to organisational success.
- It nurtures, involves and develops employees.
- It strengthens the organisation's culture by reminding employees of the common bonds that join them to the organization.

Organisation leaders need to keep in mind that employees decide how much of themselves to invest in the success of the organisation. Without these personal investments, organisations quickly find themselves out of committed human capital and unable to make the competitive moves required to stay successful in the marketplace. Like other stakeholders, employees need ongoing communication from leadership regarding the organisation's direction, strategy, performance and values. Organisations must also prove to employees that they are attending to the basics of work life, namely a safe and healthy work environment, and a fair and equitable compensation and benefits package that is the best the organisation can provide. The America at Work Research Report (2002) shows both a challenge and an opportunity for organisational leaders, namely restoring the trust between employer and employee. This mutual trust may provide the cornerstone for a strengthened sense of affiliation between employee and employer, which is the key to business success.

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Organisations also have to deal with the costs associated with a lack of mutual commitment. Aside from the direct costs associated with the resignation of employees, there are other good reasons why employers should endeavour to minimize the outflow of employees. These include productivity losses, impaired quality of services, lost business opportunities, an increased administrative burden and employee demoralization (Arnolds 1994; Kinlaw 1989). However, it is the direct costs associated with turnover that have received the most attention. The following is a list of potential costs associated with employee attrition (America at Work Research Report 1998):

- Direct recruitment costs (advertising).
- Recruitment administration (responding to enquiries; sending out application forms; equal opportunities monitoring).
- Selection costs (travelling expenses for candidates; psychometric testing; time spend on interviewing or running of assessment centres; checking references).
- Development costs (training new employee; induction training).
- Administrative costs associated with resignations (payroll arrangements; pension transfers; conducting exit interviews).
- Administrative costs associated with new starters (contract writing; medicals; sending out documentation; relocation expenses).
- Inefficiency in production or service provision (due to slackness on the part of the resigner; inexperience of the replacement employee; inefficiencies resulting from the period in which the vacancy is unfilled).
- Overtime and costs of hiring temporary workers (during period between resignation and hiring of new staff member).

Although not all the mentioned costs will apply in any one case of voluntary resignation, several are likely to feature in some way. It is the cumulative effect that leads to significant costs in this regard.

Organisations should begin a commitment-improvement effort by assessing the current level of employee commitment and determining the key commitment drivers specific to the organisation. Based on this "driver-analysis", a long -term strategy should be developed, ensuring that the time and cost of implementation is feasible and that the efforts are consistent with the organisation's culture and philosophy. Once the strategy is designed, it must be communicated throughout the organisation. Employees cannot live up to their end of the mutual commitment contract if they do not know the rules.

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Workforce commitment is a multi-faceted concept, consisting of more than the employee's intention to stay with an organisation. According to the America at Work Research Report (2000), committed employees can be described as follows:

- They work hard to improve themselves, increasing their value to the employer and they make personal sacrifices to ensure the organisation's success. They are productive.
- They recommend their organisation as a good place to work, and their organisation's products and services as the best a customer can get. They have pride in their work and in the organisation.
- They intend to stay in the organisation, even when offered better incentives elsewhere. Thus the organisation will retain them.

The traditional model of workforce commitment developed by Aon Consulting in the 1997 Loyalty in America Study, synthesises behavioural research paradigms in fields such as anthropology, sociology, psychology, economics and organisational behaviour. This three-tiered model is based on the following key assumptions:

- Employee commitment is the behavioural outcome that results when employee expectations are exceeded by their experiences on what is most important to them.
- The expectations and experiences of employees are shaped by a combination of psychological, socio-cultural and corporate level factors.
- The policies and practices of organisations have an independent and measurable influence on the experiences of employees of the organisation commitment drivers.
- The expectations and experiences of employees impact the corporate level factors, particularly when management seeks feedback from employees.

There are societal, economic and psychological factors that influence individual motivation and commitment. These can be seen as the uncontrollable variables in the commitment equation. While a great deal of attention has been focussed on defining and meeting work-life balance needs of employees, many organisations have neglected basic employee needs, such as keeping job security strong, reducing work stress and improving the remuneration structure (America at Work research report 2000). By adapting and getting back to basics, organisations can attract and retain committed employees and ensure their success in an uncertain future.

Against the above discussed background then, the aim of this study was to explore the factors within an international medical organisation that could be utilised to increase employee commitment.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In studying the level and causes of employee commitment, the researchers utilised a quantitative research design that extends on previous research and integrates new insights on employee commitment. A survey method of investigation was utilised.

The aim of the study was to explore the factors within the specific organization that could be utilised to increase employee commitment.

## RESPONDENTS

The population of this study consisted of all employees (N=800) in the particular organisation. A stratified random sample was drawn from this population, resulting in a total of 82 employees. The following biographical variables/strata were used: age, tenure/length of service, gender and level of management. The biographical characteristics of the respondents are depicted in tables 1 to 4.

Table 1: Age

Age group	Percentage of respondents
20 - 30 years	29%
30 - 40 years	57%
40 - 50 years	12%
50 + years	2%

Table 2: Gender

Gender	Percentage of respondents
Female	64 %
Male	36%

Table 3: Length of service

Years	Percentage of respondents
0 - 2	31%
3 - 5	43%
6 - 10	21%
11 +	5%

Table 4: Job level

Level	Percentage of respondents
Senior management	5%
General management	7%
Supervisor	19%
Professional/technical	24%
Clerical/administration	12%
Customer service	12%
Operations/industry	7%
Other	14%

The above mentioned biographical information shows that the majority of respondents fall in the age group 30-50 years (69 per cent), is of female origin (64 per cent), and has a length of service of 3 to 10 years (64 per cent). Respondents working on a managerial level form 31 per cent of the respondents.

## PROCEDURE

A total of 82 questionnaires were administered in three ninety minute sessions. All participants were informed about the objectives of the study and assured that the exercise is executed with top management's knowledge and approval. They were furthermore assured that the information obtained from the survey would be handled confidentially and that responses would remain anonymous. All participants gave their approval of the exercise and were willing to participate. All questionnaires were completed in full.

## MEASURING INSTRUMENTS

Two questionnaires were used in this study. Employee commitment to the organisation was measured by using The Workforce Commitment Index questionnaire (WCI). Organisation commitment to the employee was measured by using The Company Commitment Driver Questionnaire (CCDQ).

The WCI measures three aspects of employee commitment, namely: team development (productivity), referral behaviour (pride) and tenure intentions (retention). Respondents answer the questions using the following criteria: agree; somewhat agree; neither agree nor disagree (neutral); somewhat disagree; disagree. The individual responses were summed and converted into an index in order to generate an overall workforce commitment score. The index categories are as follows:

1	0 - 6	Not committed
2	7 - 12	Low commitment
3	13 - 18	Moderate commitment
4	19 - 24	High commitment
5	25 - 30	Exceptional commitment

Given that the response sets were uniform across the questions that comprise the WCI outcome scale, a Cronbach's Alpha was calculated, producing a score of 0,79, indicating a reliable measure.

The Company Commitment Driver Questionnaire consists of five sections, each representing a workplace practice, also indicated as a commitment driver. The first section (questions 7-12) examines the effectiveness of the organisation's workplace practices in meeting employees' affiliation needs. The second section (questions 13-15) examines the effectiveness of the organisation's efforts in creating a work environment that allows employees to balance their work and personal lives effectively. The third section (questions 16-24) examines the organisation's effectiveness in creating opportunities for employees to acquire a sense of achievement, whether that success is seen as taking place within the individual, the work group or the overall organisation.

The fourth section (questions 25-32) examines the effectiveness of the organisation's workplace practices in creating a safe and secure work environment. The fifth section consists of two sub-sections. The first sub-section (questions 33-41) examines the effectiveness of the organisation's overall compensation and benefits package, while the second sub-section (questions 42-87) specifically examines what benefits are important to employees and to what extent they are meeting employee expectations. For these commitment driver variables, employees were asked to indicate, according to a five-point scale, the degree to which their experience with various aspects of work met their expectations. Response categories are: well below expectations, below expectations, met expectations, above expectations and well above expectations.

## STATISTICAL ANALYSIS

The analysis was done by means of the SAS for Windows computer programme. The data derived from the questionnaires were analysed by means of descriptive and inferential statistics. With regards to inferential statistics, the Fisher's Exact Test was identified as the most appropriate measure to identify the significance of the independent variables (workplace practices) upon the dependent variable (workforce commitment). This test was identified as a better alternative to the Chi-Square method due to the limitation of a relatively small sample size.



In order to analyse the data utilising the SAS computer programme effectively, it was necessary to label the questions as variables.

## RESULTS OF THE STUDY

### Impact of biographical variables on workforce commitment

In order to determine whether the particular biographical variables had an impact upon the dependent variable (workforce commitment), the Fisher's Exact test was used to determine their significance.

The results indicated that only the variables of gender and length of service had a significant impact on workforce commitment. A more in-depth analysis of these variables indicated that both had a particular significant impact on the pride dimension of workforce commitment. Although the mentioned variables showed some significance, in general the biographical variables showed to be independent of one another.

### Employee commitment

The frequency distributions of the responses to the individual variables in the WCI (Workforce Commitment Index Questionnaire) are illustrated in tables 5 to 10, in terms of the three dimensions of workforce commitment (team development/productivity, referral behaviour/pride and tenure intentions/retention).

**Table 5: Variable 1 (Team development/productivity 1): co-workers make personal efforts to improve their skills**

Response category	Percentage
agree	41%
Somewhat agree	31%
neutral	7%
Somewhat disagree	7%
disagree	14%

**Table 6: Variable 2 (team development/productivity 2): co-workers make personal sacrifices to help group/team succeed**

Response category	Percentage
agree	38%
Somewhat agree	24%
neutral	12%
Somewhat disagree	14%
disagree	12%

**Table 7: Variable 3 (referral behaviour/pride 1): employees will recommend the company's products and services**

Response category	Percentage
agree	21%
Somewhat agree	26%
neutral	19%
Somewhat disagree	29%
disagree	5%

**Table 8: Variable 4 (referral behaviour/pride 2) : employees will recommend the company as being one of the best places to work**

Response category	Percentage
Agree	19%
Somewhat agree	28%
Neutral	19%
Somewhat disagree	17%
Disagree	17%

**Table 9: Variable 5 (tenure intentions/retention 1) : employees intend staying with the company for the next several years**

Response category	Percentage
agree	34%
Somewhat agree	12%
neutral	21%
Somewhat disagree	12%
disagree	21%

**Table 10: Variable 6 (tenure intentions/retention 2) : employees will stay with the company even if offered a similar job with higher pay**

Response category	Percentage
agree	14%
Somewhat agree	14%
neutral	17%
Somewhat disagree	7%
disagree	48%

In terms of the three dimensions of workforce commitment, the above illustrated results indicated the following:

#### *Team development/productivity*

A significant percentage (72 per cent) of respondents believes that their co-workers make personal efforts to improve their skills. In addition, 62 per cent report that their co-workers make personal sacrifices to help the group/team succeed.

*Referral behaviour/pride*

Approximately half (47 per cent) of respondents would recommend the company's products and services, as well as the company being one of the best places to work.

*Tenure intentions/retention*

46 per cent of respondents intend staying with the company for the next several years. However, only 28 per cent of respondents indicated that they would stay with the company even if offered a similar job with slightly higher pay.

The results seem to indicate that the company's main area of focus, where commitment from employees is lacking in terms of the company's retention practices, should be on its compensation practices.

**Workplace practices (commitment drivers)**

The results from the Company Commitment Driver Questionnaire are depicted in Table 11. The frequency distributions of the independent variables were utilized to evaluate employees' perceptions regarding the company's workplace practices. Table 11 depicts the failure rates of company efforts to meet employee expectations.

**Table 11: Effectiveness of organisational efforts in meeting employee expectations**

<b>Workplace practices (commitment drivers)</b>	<b>Area</b>	<b>Failure rate (%)</b>
Demonstrating importance of retaining employees	affiliation	73.81
Providing benefit programmes that compare well to other companies	rewards	73.81
Successful in retaining key staff	growth	71.43
Providing a benefits package that meets employees' family needs	rewards	71.43
Providing pay that compares well to other companies	rewards	69.05
Creates an environment of open, candid communication	affiliation	64.29
Creates a stress-free work environment	Safety & security	64.29
Allows employees to participate in planning changes	affiliation	61.90
Provides needed training	growth	61.91
Manages and communicates changes effectively	growth	61.91
Remunerates employees according to their job performance	rewards	61.91
Communicates career opportunities well	growth	59.53
Effectively communicates information about employee benefits	rewards	59.53
Demonstrates pay equity	rewards	59.52
Co-workers take responsibility for the results of their own actions	affiliation	57.14
Demonstrates concern for employee job security	Safety & security	54.76
Provides effective occupational health and safety training	Safety & security	51.22
Recognises the importance of family life	Work/life harmony	50.00
Creates a climate of learning for employees	growth	47.61

*continued*

Workplace practices (commitment drivers)	Area	Failure rate (%)
Ensures that pay and benefits package is understandable	rewards	46.61
Treats all employees equally	Safety & security	45.24
Socially responsible	growth	45.23
Offers opportunities for personal growth	growth	41.47
Builds a sense of spirit and pride	affiliation	40.47
Trusts employees to do what is right	affiliation	38.10
Co-workers satisfy each others needs as a person and not just as a worker	Work/life harmony	35.71
Competitive in relation to other companies	growth	35.71
Creates an environment free from fear, intimidation and harassment	Safety & security	35.71
Successful at attracting new workers	growth	33.33
Successfully reduces time off due to injury or illness	Safety & security	31.70
Co-workers help each other in times of heavy workload	Work/life harmony	30.95
Emphasises health and safety	Safety & security	30.95
Creates a safe and secure work environment	Safety & security	28.57

The results depicted in table 11 shows that the following commitment driver areas, in order of frequency, indicates a failure rate of 50 per cent and higher: rewards, affiliation, growth, safety and security, and work/life harmony.

Once the responses to the two questionnaires had been evaluated in terms of their frequencies, the Fisher's Exact Test was utilised to determine which workplace practices (commitment drivers) had a significant impact on the dimensions of workforce commitment.

Table 12 represents the workplace practices identified to be significant.

**Table 12: Workplace practices (commitment drivers) showing a significant impact on the three dimensions of workforce commitment**

	Dimension of dependent Variable (employee commitment)	Independent variable (workplace practices/ commitment drivers)	Significance
1	V1: team development / productivity 1	Creates an environment of open, candid communication	0.0185
2		Recognises importance of family life	0.0297
3		Communicates career opportunities well	0.0129
4		Successful in retaining key staff	0.0916
5		Emphasises health & safety	0.0809
6		Importance of benefit package in retaining employees	0.0989
7	V2: team development / productivity 2	Treats all employees equally	0.0870
8		Demonstrates concern for employee job security	0.0784

*continued*

	Dimension of dependent Variable (employee commitment)	Independent variable (workplace practices/ commitment drivers)	Significance
9		Effectively communicates information about employee benefits	0.0966
10	V3: referral behaviour / pride 1	Successful at attracting new workers	0.0169
11		Creates a safe and secure work environment	0.0272
12		Emphasises health and safety	0.0406
13		Treats all employees equally	0.0891
14	V4: referral behaviour / pride 2	Communicates career opportunities well	0.0698
15		Provided needed training	p<0.001*
16		Manages and communicates changes effectively	0.0243
17		Successful at attracting new workers	0.0702
18		Treats all employees equally	0.0259
19		Effectively communicates information on employee benefits	0.0421
20		Demonstrates pay equity	0.0322
21		Pay compares well to other companies	0.0351
22		Ensures that the pay and benefits package is understandable	0.0951
23		Importance of benefit package in retaining employees	0.0992
24	V5 : tenure intentions / retention 1	Builds a sense of spirit and pride	0.0011
25		Trusts employees to do what is right	0.0241
26		Offers opportunities for personal growth	0.0046
27		Competitive in relation to other companies	0.0966
28		Socially responsible	0.0171
29		Treats all employees equally	0.0055
30		Demonstrates concern for employee job security	0.0516
31		Effectively communicates information about employee benefits	0.0554
32		Ensures that pay and benefits package is understandable	0.0434
33		Importance of benefits package in retaining employees	0.0143
34	V6 : tenure intentions / retention 2	Builds a sense of spirit and pride	0.0047
35		Trusts employees to do what is right	p<0.001*
36		Treats all employees equally	p<0.001*
37		Providing a benefits package that meets employees' family needs	0.0243
38		Pay compares well to other companies	0.0132
39		Importance of benefit package in retaining employees	p<0.001*

P≤0.001

The above analysis indicates that, although there are a number of workplace practices (commitment drivers) that impact significantly on workforce commitment, four drivers seem to show distinctive significance, namely:

- 1 The emphasis placed on the importance of a benefit package in retaining employees.
- 2 Equal treatment of all employees.
- 3 The autonomy awarded to employees by trusting them to do what is right.
- 4 Provide employees with the needed training.

From the results in table 12 it is evident that certain workplace practices (commitment drivers) have an overlapping impact on more than only one dimension of workforce commitment. It was therefore decided to conduct an overall analysis to obtain a holistic view on which workplace practices (commitment drivers) had the most significant impact on the workforce commitment index. Fisher's Exact Test was utilised to identify the most significant drivers of workforce commitment as a whole, and not upon the separate dimensions of the dependent variable.

Table 13 shows the results, indicating the workplace practices to be the most significant drivers of workforce commitment.

**Table 13: Workplace practices identified as most significant drivers of workforce commitment**

Workplace practice	Area	Significance
Builds a sense of spirit and pride	affiliation	0.0060
Demonstrates the importance of retaining employees	affiliation	0.0516
Allows employees to participate in planning changes	affiliation	0.0438
Trusts employees to do what is right	affiliation	0.0642
Providing a benefit package that meets the employees' family needs	rewards	0.0599
Demonstrates pay equity	rewards	0.0089
Pay compares well to other companies	rewards	0.0287
Importance of benefit package in retaining employees	rewards	0.0093
Successfully reduces time off due to injury or illness	safety	0.0572
Treats all employees equally	safety	0.0860
Demonstrates concern for employee job security	safety	0.0815
Offers opportunities for personal growth	growth	0.0637
Successful at attracting new workers	growth	0.0522
Co-workers satisfy each others needs as a person and not just a worker	Work / life harmony	0.0333

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The results in table 13 indicate that the five workplace practice/commitment driver areas, identified as being significant drivers of workforce commitment, in order of frequency are: affiliation, rewards, safety and security, growth and work/life harmony.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The priority areas for improvement, in terms of commitment drivers in which the company is not performing well, are the following:

- Developing a strong sense of affiliation to the company by retaining key employees, demonstrating commitment to employees by building pride in the company, trusting employees to know what is right and involving them in the planning of changes.
- Focus on the individual by providing competitive pay and benefits that truly meet the needs of the employee. Make sure that pay is at least reasonably competitive and consistent with the company's compensation philosophy, since there is a strong correlation between perceptions of internal equity and those concerning external competitiveness. Review the relative fairness and competitiveness of all pay elements to ensure that they work together to deliver a total package that is valued by employees (particularly those who demonstrate committed behaviour) and are cost effective for the company.
- The company needs to demonstrate that it strives for pay equity and that it considers a benefits package as an important commitment tool. Ensure that people experience pay as being internally equitable. This may be accomplished through effective education and training, a well-designed pay structure, or both. Recognise and reward your contributors, and support employee needs for development and career growth through an effective performance management process.
- Ensure that all employees are treated equally regardless of their race, national origin, lifestyle, gender or age. The company should focus on reducing the cost of injuries and illnesses by emphasising a safe and secure work environment. While a great deal of attention has been focussed on defining and meeting work-life balance needs of employees, the company may have neglected basic employee needs, such as keeping job security strong, reducing stress and improving the remuneration structure.
- Provide additional opportunities for personal growth of employees within the company.

- Increase the effectiveness of the company's recruitment efforts by not only focussing on attracting new workers, but on retaining key staff. The company shows a high staff turnover rate and should therefore refocus their attention on employee retention and development.

The above mentioned priorities represent the overall commitment situation within the company.

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