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**Deposited in DRO:**

07 January 2011

**Version of attached file:**

Accepted Version

**Peer-review status of attached file:**

Peer-reviewed

**Citation for published item:**

Torka, N. and Schyns, B. (2010) 'On the job and co-worker commitment of Dutch agency workers and permanent employees.', *International journal of human resource management.*, 21 (8). pp. 1307-1322.

**Further information on publisher's website:**

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09585192.2010.483858>

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## **On the job and co-worker commitment of agency workers and permanent employees**

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**In press: International Journal of HRM**

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## ABSTRACT

This article explores the relationship between employment status (agency workers vs. permanent employees) and affective and normative job and co-worker commitment. Our study was conducted on employees from four metal companies in the Netherlands. As HRM practices seem to influence employee commitment, we performed 89 interviews across all four companies and included blue-collar workers, their managers (direct supervisors, HR managers and production managers), as well as works council members. To test our hypotheses on commitment differences, we conducted quantitative research within the companies (permanent employees  $N = 167$ ; agency workers  $N = 54$ ), all of who were blue-collar workers. Results show that permanent employees and agency workers express similar degrees of commitment to their job and to their co-workers, apart from affective commitment to co-workers, which is lower for agency workers than for permanent workers. We argue that national legislation, as well as managers' attempts to offer HR practices equal to those of permanent staff, play a prominent role in stimulating agency workers' commitment.

### **On the job and co-worker commitment of agency workers and permanent employees**

Much has been written about the consequences of agency work for employees and organisations. Authors such as Pfeffer (1994) and Rousseau (1995) assume that, without a permanent labour contract, the development of employee commitment and other desirable attitudes is wishful thinking. As a result, they assume that non-permanent employees' work-related behaviour will suffer. However, research shows contradicting results: workers with a non-permanent employment status can develop commitment comparable to those of permanent employees (e.g., Pearce 1993) and their commitment can even exceed that of the latter (McDonald and Makin 2000). How can we explain these findings? A salient explanation is that there must be a 'black box' between the labour contract/commitment link: other factors are obscuring a direct relationship. This paper focuses on one of these factors: HRM practices (e.g., Torka and Schyns 2007; Mitlacher 2008).

In this study, we concentrate on two commitment foci: the job and the co-workers. There are four reasons for us focussing on less abstract foci than the entire organisation. *First*, commitment can work upwards: proximate foci can influence abstract ones (e.g. Yoon, Baker and Ko 1994). *Second*, research shows that employees with lower hierarchical functions are committed foremost to their job (e.g. Gallie and White 1993), which is a fact of particular relevance for the population we deal with in this article, namely, blue-collar workers. *Third*, research indicates that commitment towards the entire organisation does not necessarily predict work-related behaviour or performance (see the next paragraph). *Finally*, meta-analyses found that time is needed to build up commitment to something as abstract as the entire organisation (e.g., Mathieu and Zajac 1990; Meyer, Stanley, Herscovitch and Topolnytsky 2002). However, the organisational 'membership' of many agency workers is limited and shorter than those of permanent staff.

We will begin by highlighting the relationships between HRM practices and commitment. We will also elaborate on Dutch legislation for agency work since managers' freedom in shaping organisational conditions for agency workers is restricted by labour law and collective agreements. After a discussion of the method of this study, we will present the findings. Finally, we will draw conclusions concerning agency workers' commitment and companies' opportunities to manage non-permanent workers' attitudes and behaviour.

### **Exploring HR practices as antecedents of job and co-worker commitment**

Many authors assume that employee commitment towards the organisation ultimately contributes to company performance (e.g., Beer, Spector, Lawrence, Quinn Mills and Walton 1984). The interest in commitment displayed by scholars and practitioners is therefore not surprising. However, research challenges this idea, showing that organisational commitment is unrelated to (e.g., Somers and Birnbaum 1998) or has very little influence on job performance (e.g., Mathieu and Zajac 1990). Consequently, Benkhoff's (1997) and Becker, Billings, Eveleth and Gilbert's (1996) findings argue for using less abstract foci of commitment: they found that supervisor commitment had a stronger influence on performance than organisational commitment. Most research still focuses on affective commitment towards the entire organisation. Consequently, knowledge about other natures and foci of commitment, such as the ones we explore in this article, is limited (Meyer et al. 2002; but see, e.g., Felfe, Schmook, Schyns and Six 2008). In general, commitment can be defined as "a (mental) force that binds an individual to a course of action of relevance to one or more targets." (Meyer and Herscovitch 2001, p. 302). Although Allen and Meyer (1990) distinguish between three types of commitment - affective, normative and continuance commitment - we limit our study to affective and normative commitment because research has shown that these two types of commitment predominantly predict the behaviour desired

by companies (e.g. Meyer et al. 2002). Affective commitment refers to emotional attachment. Normative commitment involves moral obligations.

*Job commitment* refers to the likelihood that an individual will continue working in a particular job because he or she feels psychologically attached to it (Rusbult and Farrell 1983, p. 430). Related constructs are job involvement and work involvement. According to Hackett, Lapierre and Hausdorf (2001, p. 394), job involvement tends to be a function of how much one's job can satisfy one's current needs. Work involvement reflects a normative belief about the value of work in one's life. Job commitment is not concerned with either the satisfaction of individuals' needs through the job (job involvement) or the importance of work in one's life (work involvement), but focuses on the question as to whether or not someone is attached to his/her job and why. Therefore, compared to job involvement, job commitment is more specific: it is concerned with the underlying nature of one's needs. An individual with high affective job commitment likes his/her job; an individual with high normative job commitment has certain norms and values towards the job, that is, he or she feels a moral obligation to perform well in a job.

*Co-worker commitment* refers to the likelihood that a worker feels psychologically attached to his/her colleagues. Affective co-worker commitment refers to a worker liking his colleagues and enjoying working with them. Normative co-worker commitment refers to 'collegiality', or, to put it differently, to the totality of internalized normative pressures to act in a way that meets co-workers' goals and interests (Wiener, 1982, p. 421).

#### *Organisational conditions for commitment: HR practices*

Work experiences correlate significantly and positively with affective and normative commitment to the organization (Meyer et al. 2002). Work experiences could be defined as everything the individual experiences in the work context. We can therefore link these

experiences to HR practices. Not only job characteristics and pay (e.g. Morris, Lydka and O’Creevy 1993), but also development, promotion and training opportunities (e.g. Benson 2006), as well as opportunities to take part in decision-making (e.g. Lincoln and Kalleberg 1985), influence commitment positively. Consequently, we assume that HR practices serve as antecedents for both affective and normative commitment. Not much research has been done on the relationship between recruitment/selection and commitment. However, when taking into account the employment status, the dichotomy voluntary/involuntary seems an important predictor of commitment (e.g. Feldman, Doeringhaus and Turnley 1995; Krausz, Brandwein and Fox 1995): Are the workers doing temp work because they have no other possibility and see this as a stepping stone to get back into permanent work or did they chose this kind of employment because they prefer to be temp workers (see Torka and Schyns 2007; see also De Cuyper and De Witte 2008)?

In spite of the evidence for HR practices as antecedents of commitment, we have to be cautious with our assumptions. The above-mentioned research is solely focused on commitment towards the organisation. Several scholars point to the interference of potential multi-level problems in commitment research. This means that antecedents, as well as consequences of commitment, should be linked to appropriate commitment foci. For example, research shows that motivation has a significant positive relationship with occupational commitment, but not with organisational commitment (Wallace 1997). Therefore, it seems reasonable to assume that different HR antecedents may also impact commitment foci differently.

*Organisational conditions for agency workers: HR practices*

In contrast to regular workers, agency workers have to deal with two organisations: the temp agency and the user firm. This also means that agency workers have two suppliers of HR practices. Thus, two organisations share the responsibility for directing agency workers’

commitment. Research shows that the user firms' HR practices can influence the commitment towards the agency and vice versa (e.g. Connelly, Gallagher and Gilley 2007). Evidence suggests that agency workers have less attractive HR practices than permanent employees (e.g. European Foundation 2001; McGovern, Smeaton and Hill 2004). The logical assumption that agency workers' commitment and behaviour will suffer therefore seems plausible, as organisations seem to invest less into the drivers of agency workers' commitment. We need to take into account, however, the freedom that agency and user firms have in offering HR practices to agency workers, as it is restricted by national legislation and collective agreements.

Despite the fact that European social partners had already proposed a directive for the regulation of temporary work in Europe in 1982, the directive was never officially negotiated at the sectoral level (Arrowsmith 2006) until now, due to differences of opinion on equality and terms and conditions of employment. This means that regulations and, as a consequence, working conditions for agency workers differ between European countries.

#### *Organisational conditions for agency workers: regulations in the Netherlands*

The Netherlands are the second largest user of agency work in Europe (2.5% of the total workforce, just behind the UK, with 4.5%; Eurociett 2007). On July 1<sup>st</sup> 1998, the Labour Market Intermediaries Act (WAADI) came into force. The WAADI abolished the licensing system (i.e., previously, permission was needed for running a temp agency) and a number of restrictions relating to placement, maximum duration (from a maximum of six months to an open-ended duration), worker redeployment, and limitations in the ability of agencies to obstruct agency workers from entering into direct employment contracts with user firms and others. Other rules remained, such as a prohibition on posting agency workers in user firms in which there was a strike, the dual responsibility of user firms and agencies for the payments



of social premiums and taxes, and, in contrast to, for example, the UK, an equal wages clause for agency workers. Additionally, sectoral level agreements between the agency employer organisations (in particular, the Algemene Bond Uitzendondernemingen (ABU), the Nederlandse Bond voor Bemiddelings- en Uitzendondernemingen (NBBU), and the Vereniging Payroll Ondernemingen (VPO)) and the unions were written. In January 1999, the Flexibility and Security Act came into force. The Act views the legal position of temporary employees as a standard labour contract between a temporary employee and the agency, and also introduces participation rights for agency workers in the user firm (Arrowsmith 2006).

In contrast to other countries (e.g. France and Italy), there are no restrictions in the UK, Germany and the Netherlands concerning reasons for agency worker use. Restrictions in other countries comprise of, for example, using temporary workers only for work limited to specific, non-permanent jobs that are not part of the firms usual work (e.g., Portugal and Spain) and for exceptional peaks of work (e.g., Belgium and Norway). This means, managers in the Netherlands are permitted to use agency workers for regular jobs and also during normal levels of activity. Therefore, Dutch companies have the opportunity to offer agency workers HR practices concerning job characteristics equal to those of permanent employees.

Furthermore, in contrast to other countries, there is no limit in the Netherlands on the duration of employing agency workers for the user company. In other countries, the limitation of the duration differs between eight (Greece) and twenty-four months (Portugal). This means that Dutch companies have more degrees of freedom than companies in other countries when it comes to their staffing practices for agency workers (Arrowsmith, 2006).

In the Netherlands, agency workers' tenure plays an important role with respect to the quality of HR practices for several reasons. First, the collective agreements between agency work employer associations and unions include provisions on training after a certain time period and a time-related remuneration scheme. Second, when an employee works 26 weeks

for the same user company, that client has to pay the agency worker the same wage and overtime rates as permanent employees in the company. Third, according to the Dutch law on works councils, agency workers with a length of service that exceeds 26 weeks of work for the same *agency* have a right to elect council members. After one year of service, they are eligible for election. Agency workers with a length of service that exceeds 24 months of work for the same *user firm* have a right to vote and are eligible for election on the user company's works council. Thus, for Dutch agency workers, tenure influences HR practices positively. The Dutch regulations, and more specifically, the possibility of an open-ended assignment at the user firm or the use of agency work for the firms' usual work, as well as the consequences of the equal pay act and the access to training, make the development of commitment in temporary workers that is comparable to permanent workers possible. We can therefore assume that the job commitment of agency workers will not differ from those of user firms' permanent employees:

*Hypothesis 1: Agency workers' affective commitment towards the job is not different from those of permanent employees.*

*Hypothesis 2: Agency workers' normative commitment towards the job is not different from those of permanent employees.*

However, the link between HR practices and co-worker commitment needs to be explained further. We assume that agency workers and permanent workers will regard each other as more equal when they are treated equally by the organisation. As mentioned before, Dutch legislation makes this possible. In particular, the opportunity for open-ended assignments can enhance the feeling of being real colleagues for both groups and increase the sense of commitment to each other. We know from prior research that longer-term cooperation adds to

the feeling of solidarity between co-workers (Koster 2005) and we assume this to be true for temporary and permanent workers as well.

*Hypothesis 3: Agency workers' affective commitment towards co-workers is not different from those of permanent employees.*

*Hypothesis 4: Agency workers' normative commitment towards co-workers is not different from those of permanent employees.*

## **Method**

### *Company background*

Company A and B produce recognisable final products. The companies share one HR manager: he works sixteen hours a week for company A and sixteen hours a week for company B. Company A has 164 employees with a permanent contract. 88 of these employees are low- to medium skilled fitters and welders. In addition, 78 so-called 'flexible workers' were working for the company at the time of the research. These included agency workers, fixed-term employees, and hired hands (i.e., workers' 'borrowed' from other companies). 62 of the 78 non-permanents worked in production. Company B employs 137 permanent staff. 52 of the 137 staff members work as fitters and welders. The company had also hired 38 agency workers. 26 of the 38 were fitters and welders. Due to their seasonal products (summer vs. winter), company A and B have opposite peaks and troughs. In order to deal with these fluctuations, the companies exchange permanent employees. Company C produces a recognisable final product, but is also active in the process industry. 350 people work for the company. 50 of the 190 manufacturing workers are agency workers. The workers are low- to medium skilled. Company D develops and produces hydraulic systems. 198 of the 450 employees work in manufacturing; 80 of the 198 manufacturing workers are flexible workers. Formal vocational training in advance is not necessary, as the workers perform

simple assembly work. We included only agency workers and permanent staff in the quantitative study, excluding other forms of ‘flexible workers’, such as employees with a fixed term contract. In the qualitative study, six employees with a fixed term contract participated. All of them used to be agency workers within the user firm. We conducted interviews with them because they can provide us with information from an insider’s perspective: outlining differences between agency workers and company employees based on their own experiences.

### *Qualitative study*

To gain knowledge on HR practices, semi-structured interviews were conducted. We interviewed fifty-four metalworkers (22 were permanent employees, 32 had a non-permanent employment relationship, including agency workers and employees with a fixed-term contract), twenty-one supervisors, three HR managers, six works council members, and four production managers. Dutch research had already shown that the commonly used instruments for measuring commitment are not suitable for low-educated employees (Peeters and Meijer 1995), so another aim of the interviews was to derive questionnaire items. For this purpose, we asked the respondents two questions: What does commitment towards the job mean to you? And, what does commitment towards other colleagues mean to you? To gain knowledge on HR practices and possible differences between employees and agency workers, we asked the interviewees several questions, where each question was related to one HR practice. We asked managers the following: “Could you describe the workers’ job (including physical work conditions, relationships with colleagues and supervisors, opportunities for training, participation in decision making, and satisfaction with pay and benefits) and do you believe that the ... (all the mentioned practices) of agency workers and permanent employees differ?” We asked the same question to the workers themselves, asking them to elaborate on the HR practices as they perceive them, as well as on differences between company employees and

agency workers. Additionally, we asked the HR and production managers about their motives for using agency workers.

### *Quantitative study*

We conducted questionnaire research to test our hypotheses on the similarities in commitment between permanent and temporary workers. We designed instruments for affective and normative commitment to the job and co-workers based on the workers' answers to the two commitment questions in the interviews. Before distributing the questionnaire, we asked five workers from company A to check the items on clarity. In company A and B, the first author distributed and collected the questionnaire personally (i.e., walking the floor). In company C, the researcher held a presentation on the research for every team (in total 11) and then distributed the questionnaires. The company provided a box for the completed questionnaires. In company D, the HR manager distributed the questionnaire through the supervisors and a return box was installed in the canteen. In total, 221 blue-collar workers (167 permanent employees and 54 agency workers) participated in the study (overall response rate: 47 per cent).

The mean age for permanent employees was forty-one years; for agency workers, thirty-six years. The mean tenure at the user firm for agency workers with a permanent contract with the agency was 2.22 years. For those with a fixed-term contract with the agency, it was 1.04 years, and for agency workers with a so-called phase A, 0.63 years. Phase A applies to the first 78 weeks of work for the agency: the employment contract with the agency ends when the contract between agency and user firm ends. We treated agency workers as one group for two reasons. First, we had a limited number of respondents in the different contract groups: 13 with a phase A contract, 22 with a fixed-term contract, and 16 with a permanent contract with the agency. Second, we asked the respondents about their 'continuous' tenure:

the length of their current assignment. Therefore, some of the participants may have a longer tenure overall, when the length of different assignments is added up.

### **Results qualitative study: HR practices for agency workers and permanent employees compared**

#### *Staffing*

Based on HR and production managers' answers, we can conclude that the companies use agency work for the following reasons: (1) to absorb fluctuations in demand, (2) to screen possible new employees, and (3) as a buffer for their permanent staff. The managers from companies A, B and D mentioned all three reasons. According to company C managers, reason one and three hold true, but the company does not have to deal with production peaks and troughs due to the long-term contracts with customers (between 10 and 15 years). In this company, short-term agency work is not possible because the product is very sensitive and subject to (international) law. All staff in Company C has to be screened by the Dutch Military Intelligence and Security Service. This procedure takes two months. Company A and B have seasonal peaks and troughs: six months peak and six months troughs. The fluctuations in Company D are more unpredictable.

All companies also use temp agencies as a supply pool for potential permanent staff. By using agency work, they can extend the legal probation period (one to two months). All companies strive to take over 'good' agency workers. In company C, the decision to take over agency workers takes up to three years, except for excellent agency workers. After three years, three decisions are possible: those who perform badly have to leave; those who perform average get a permanent contract with the agency; and those who perform particularly well receive a permanent contract with the company.

However, many agency workers prefer agency work over a traditional employment relationship. As a matter of fact, company A and B offered several agency workers a permanent contract, but these agency workers refused because they like being temps. According to some of the agency workers, they do not want a permanent contract with the company because they like the idea that they can leave whenever they want to, and because they like the fact that the agency would look for other assignments for them.

Finally, the buffer function of agency work in companies A, B and D has a particular history. Mass redundancies took place in the 1980s. The companies were forced to lay off a large percentage of their staff. This trauma, along with the negative reports of it in the media, is still remembered vividly by the managers. Therefore, even in times of low order volume, up to 40 per cent of the blue-collar workers have a non-permanent employment relationship. Some of the agency workers have worked for the same company for up to six years.

### *Job characteristics*

According to the HR and production managers, the agency workers perform the same tasks as their colleagues with a permanent contract after an initial trial period. In company D, due to the unskilled, simple work, this period spans a few days to a few weeks. In the other companies, the period lasts up to several months for each manufacturing function. As mentioned before, only company D also uses short-term agency work (between a few days and a few weeks) and only these short-timers perform tasks of less quality than permanent staff.

Workers from all four companies are in favour of this equality in job characteristics between agency workers and company staff after the trial period. According to the workers, it is even possible that the task content of the work of agency workers is more enriched (including more challenge and variety) than that of the companies' permanent staff. Good

examples can be found in companies A and B. Some agency workers manufacture the whole final product, while some permanent employees 'only' fit product parts. In company C, some agency workers have functions on a higher hierarchical level than company employees. The job characteristics are an additional reason why some of the agency workers in company A have rejected a permanent job offer. As mentioned before, company A and B exchange workers and accepting a permanent contract would mean that they have to work for company B during A's troughs. According to company A's agency workers, the job characteristics in company B are less challenging, which was also a reason for refusing a permanent contract with company A.

#### *Physical working conditions*

Differences in the physical work conditions appear to exist in all companies. In company A, new welders (all of them start as agency workers) do the so-called metre welding of vessels, that is, the physically most demanding work. However, since all new employees start with this task, differences are not a matter of contract, but of length of service. According to the managers, this is the only difference between agency workers and permanent staff. However, all workers mention more differences in physical work conditions. First, only short-term hired workers have to weld galvanised steel. Second, permanent employees have a better (equipped) work cabin than short-term non-permanent workers. Third, since the agency workers have to pay for their own working clothes, the state of their clothing is not as good as permanent employees, and this can lead to dangerous situations. Fourth, only employees with a permanent, fixed-term contract and long-term agency workers receive customized earplugs from the (hiring) company.

In company C, agency workers do not perform more demanding or boring tasks than company employees. Agency workers receive working clothes and other protective materials



from the company for free. One visible difference exists between agency workers and permanent employees: permanent employees wear a white name badge and agency workers a yellow one. Several supervisors, employees, and agency workers mentioned this as an ‘unpleasant’ difference. In company D, only short-term agency workers (up to a few weeks) perform more boring and physically demanding work. Only the short-timers have to pay for their work clothes and protective materials. They do not wear clothing designed for the company and therefore are recognisable as agency workers.

### *Social climate*

The company staff and agency workers in all four companies state that they experience the same treatment. The agency workers ‘mix’ with the companies’ permanent staff during work and breaks. Some agency workers also meet their colleagues after hours. According to the agency workers, they receive the same friendly and respectful treatment from user firm supervisors and the managers as company staff. When departments organise informal meetings, agency workers are also invited. The supervisors and managers mention the importance of treating flexible and permanent staff equally in order to keep motivation high and a willingness to return on another occasion.

### *Training (-on-the-job) and development*

In all four companies, agency workers mention that they receive the same opportunities for training-on-the-job through, for example, job enrichment and rotation, after the trial period. In company A, welders can switch to the fitting department and vice versa. In company B, company staff and agency workers assemble rather complex final products together. Thus, agency workers can learn the different steps necessary (including, for example, hydraulics, pneumatics and electricity) from company staff. Company C has semi-autonomous teams. As

in company B, company staff is used for knowledge and skills transfer to agency workers. In company D, 'good' agency workers can also take part in the function rotation system. According to the HR manager, many permanent employees do not want to participate in function rotation and this has a positive impact on agency workers opportunities to receive training on the job.

All companies also finance training for long-term and/or 'promising' agency workers. These are the agency workers whom the managers would like to offer a company contract. In general, the companies share training costs with the agencies and this co-financing sometimes leads to problems with the agencies, especially when courses are relatively expensive. Company B paid for three agency workers, one of whom preferred remaining in agency work over a permanent company contract.

#### *Pay and benefits*

In company A and B, former agency workers who are now employed by the company report that they earned between 150 and 250 Euro less as agency workers, although they performed the same functions. However, in both companies, some agency workers report that they earn 200 Euro a month more than permanent staff. All of them are employed by agencies that are specialised in posting skilled technical workers. In company A and B, agency workers, in contrast to permanent staff, do not receive performance bonuses, or an end-of-year bonus (4 per cent of the gross salary), or a so-called CO2 bonus (for welders) and they cannot take out an insurance for glasses and dentures. Furthermore, agency workers only receive overtime pay when they work more than 40 hours a week (permanent staff: more than 36 hours a week). Agency workers with a short tenure (up to six months) have to pay for their own work clothes. In company C, agency workers receive the same salary as their colleagues with a permanent contract, as well as an end-of-year and middle-of-year bonus, but only permanent

staff receives dividends. Concerning the salary, the manager urges the agency to pay the same salary that permanent workers receive. For all staff, more than 8.5 hours of work a day is considered overtime and paid as such. Agency workers cannot take part in the collective pension insurance and they do not receive 50 Euros for their birthday. The company, agency and the worker share costs for training. When the worker completes a course successfully, the user firm pays the worker his/her financial contribution back. Company D pays their permanent employees, as well as agency workers, a salary above the average of firms in the same sector. The company has to do so to attract and retain (agency) workers. A few years ago, after negative rumours had been spreading on the work floor regarding salaries, the HR department and the works council did research on the salary of agency workers. They found that other companies paid more. As a consequence, they increased the hourly salary. Contrary to the other companies, permanent employees in company D do not receive additional salary (dividends, end-of-year bonus, etc.).

### *Employee influence*

All four companies have a works council. The works council members tried to interest long-term agency workers in works council membership, but none of the agency workers responded. The works council has a right of consent (Instemmingsrecht) - the most far-reaching right - on labour-related issues not regulated through a collective agreement. This means that the councils also (co-)decide on the use of flexible labour. Although works council members in company D question the amount of agency work, they, as well as council members in the other companies, support the use of agency work for the three reasons mentioned in the staffing section. All interviewed workers mentioned that the works council is a good 'invention', but they did not know the responsibilities of the council. In all companies, team meetings take place on a regular basis (2 to 4 times a month). The agency

workers usually participate and all managers state that they appreciate the agency workers' involvement. The managers see agency workers as having extensive knowledge from other companies that can be helpful. In company A, some agency workers participate in a quality circle. The company is building a new welding department and the welders can co-decide on the design.

**Results: Quantitative study: Testing for equality of affective and normative commitment towards the job and the co-workers**

*Preliminary analyses*

Prior to testing our hypotheses, we conducted factor analyses in order to test for the dimensionality of our instruments. Appendix A and B depict the results of the factor analyses. This step was necessary to ensure construct validity, as the instruments were newly established from our qualitative work. We subsequently conducted reliability analyses for all instruments.

*Affective and normative job commitment.* The instruments for the assessment of affective and normative commitment to the job consisted of five and eight items, respectively. A factor analysis revealed a clear two-factor solution using the scree-plot criterion. All items loaded sufficiently on their respective factor (affective versus normative commitment). The internal consistency for affective job commitment was  $\alpha = .75$ . The internal consistency for normative job commitment was  $\alpha = .87$ .

*Affective and normative commitment to co-workers.* The instruments for the assessment of affective and normative commitment to co-workers consisted of eight and five items, respectively. A factor analysis revealed a clear two-factor solution using the scree-plot criterion. One item from the normative commitment instrument had to be deleted due to a low

factor loading. All other items loaded sufficiently on their respective factor (affective versus normative commitment). The internal consistency for affective commitment to co-workers was  $\alpha = .91$ . The internal consistency for the four remaining items assessing normative commitment to co-workers was  $\alpha = .85$ .

### *Test of hypotheses*

We initially conducted four t-tests to test whether or not agency workers differ from permanent workers in their affective and normative commitment towards their work and their co-workers.

*Affective job commitment.* The mean differences between permanent and agency workers were very small for affective commitment towards the job ( $M_{permanent} = 3.58$ ;  $M_{agency} = 3.59$ ). The t-test did not reveal any significant differences between the two groups ( $t(206) = -0.08$ ; *n.s.*).

*Normative job commitment.* Again, the mean differences between permanent and agency workers were very small for normative commitment towards the job ( $M_{permanent} = 4.47$ ;  $M_{agency} = 4.44$ ). The t-test did not reveal any significant differences between the two groups ( $t(210) = 0.46$ ; *n.s.*).

*Affective commitment to co-workers.* The mean differences between permanent and agency workers were small but substantial for affective commitment to co-workers ( $M_{permanent} = 3.66$ ;  $M_{agency} = 3.43$ ). In this case, the t-test revealed a significant difference between the two groups ( $t(195) = 2.46$ ;  $p < .05$ ). We then checked whether or not the user firm tenure and department tenure influenced affective commitment towards co-workers by means of a regression analysis. This turned out not to be the case.

*Normative commitment to co-workers.* The mean differences between permanent and agency workers were very small for normative commitment to co-workers ( $M_{permanent} = 4.31$ ;

$M_{agency} = 4.33$ ). The t-test did not reveal any significant differences between the two groups ( $t(216) = -0.18$ ; *n.s.*).

As t-tests test for differences and our hypotheses were expecting equality, we conducted equivalence tests to test for the equality of differences (Rogers, Howard and Vesey 1993). The scales were transformed so that they had an absolute null-point, thus ranging from zero to four. The equivalence interval was defined as  $\pm 10\%$  of the mean of the permanent workers.

*Affective job commitment.* The equivalence interval for affective commitment to job was  $\delta_1 = 0.26$  and  $\delta_2 = -0.26$ . Following Rogers et al. (1993), we computed z-values for each  $\delta$ , resulting in  $z_1 = -2.39$  ( $p < .01$ ) and  $z_2 = 2.22$  ( $p < .05$ ). Thus, our hypothesis was supported.

*Normative job commitment.* The equivalence interval for normative commitment to job was  $\delta_1 = 0.35$  and  $\delta_2 = -0.35$ . The z-values were  $z_1 = -4.62$  ( $p < .01$ ) and  $z_2 = 5.54$  ( $p < .01$ ). This supports our hypothesis.

*Affective commitment to co-workers.* The equivalence interval for affective commitment to co-workers was  $\delta_1 = 0.27$  and  $\delta_2 = -0.27$ . The z-values were  $z_1 = -0.45$  (*n.s.*) and  $z_2 = 5.36$  ( $p < .01$ ). Thus, our hypothesis was not supported for affective commitment to co-workers.

*Normative commitment to co-workers.* The equivalence interval for normative commitment to colleagues was  $\delta_1 = 0.33$  and  $\delta_2 = -0.33$ . The z-values were  $z_1 = -4.27$  ( $p < .01$ ) and  $z_2 = 3.90$  ( $p < .01$ ). This supports our hypothesis.

### **General discussion, limitations, and consequences**

The aim of this paper was to explore the relationship between employment status (agency workers vs. permanent staff) and affective and normative commitment towards the job and co-workers. We assumed on the basis of previous research that HR practices influence this

relationship. Results show that agency workers' affective and normative commitment to the job and their normative commitment towards co-workers do not differ from their colleagues with a permanent contract. Our qualitative research results show that agency workers perform the same tasks as their permanent colleagues in all companies, at least after the agency workers have completed an initial trial period. Furthermore, managers from all companies aim to minimize differences between permanent and non-permanent staff concerning other HR practices. This 'equality' may explain the lack of differences in agency and permanent workers' commitment. However, with respect to pay and benefits, some differences seem to remain. For example, in company A and B, agency workers do not receive a substantial end-of-the-year bonus. Since these differences seem not to impact affective and normative job commitment and normative colleague commitment, we assume that future research should take more care of potential 'multi-level problems' when investigating antecedents and consequences of commitment. This means, when certain antecedents are not significantly related to certain commitments, these antecedents can still have an impact on other commitments.

Norms and values (normative job and co-worker commitment) hold up 'even' in non-permanent work-arrangements. This may especially hold true for those agency workers who experience agency work as a 'stepping stone', namely, as an opportunity to gain a regular employment relationship with the user firm. When agency workers meet norms and values expected by the user firm they may be rewarded with a permanent contract.

We did find one significant difference between agency workers and permanent staff: the former have less affective commitment towards their co-workers than the latter. Regression analysis showed that user firm and department tenure have no significant influence. One possible explanation for this finding could be that a sense of security is a pre-condition for building affective relationships. Although some agency workers have been

working for the user firm for years, they still have a realistic awareness that their arrangement with the firm can end from one day to the next. They are consequently cautious when investing emotionally in their colleagues. A comparable phenomenon has been noted in the research into so-called serial expatriates: they seem to be unable to build strong relationships with others (Richardson and Zikic 2007).

This study has limitations. The study comprised of only cross-sectional data. A longitudinal design is needed to test whether tenure, HR practices, and/or changing employment status (from agency worker to permanent employee) really predict commitment. A further limitation was the restriction to one employee group (low- to medium skilled blue-collar workers) in one sector (metal industry). Further research should be done with different and larger samples. Considering the importance of agency and user firm supervisors, we recommend that both be included in future research on the employment status-commitment link. Research on Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) shows that the quality of the relationship with the supervisor influences the delegation of challenging tasks, commitment, occupational self-efficacy, and performance (e.g. Dunegan, Duchon and Uhl-Bien 1992; Graen, Novak and Sommerkamp 1982; Schyns, Paul, Mohr and Blank 2005). Hence, supervisors from both agency and user firm are likely to impact commitment.

Notwithstanding these limitations, this study has implications for future research and practices. Authors who assume that agency work cannot be beneficial for agency workers and the user company in the long term seem to ignore research that supports the idea that the attitudes and behaviours of agency workers do not necessarily suffer. Automatically assuming a negative effect of agency work seems also to homogenise HR practices concerning agency workers: agency workers are not necessarily day labourers, used to accepting short-term fluctuations for unfair material and immaterial rewards. Some companies seem to understand that they are dependent on agency workers' effort for maximizing organizational efficiency



and are willing to invest in them with attractive HR policies. Therefore, user firms' decisions concerning the employment status are not an exclusive predictor of agency workers' attitudes and behaviours, although the overall treatment of non-permanent staff is. In addition, some agency workers voluntarily choose the 'power of a potential good-bye' (Torka and Schyns 2007). For this group of agency workers, a traditional employment relationship may include undesired outcomes. Finally, other countries can benefit from the Dutch experience, as Dutch national legislation for agency workers, in contrast to legislation in other countries, makes it possible to treat agency workers the same as permanent staff and offer them a long-term tenure within the user firm. These regulations do not restrict firms and allow HR practices that are positive for the development of agency workers' attitudes and behaviours.

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**Appendix: Factor analyses results**

A) Affective and normative commitment to the job

**Variance explained:**

Factor 1	36.89%
Factor 2	17.97%
Factor 3	7.25%
Factor 4	6.82%

**Factor Loadings**

Item	Factor 1	Factor 2
I like the job I do	.080	.780
I perform my job with pleasure	.009	.673
Even if I would not need the money, I would remain in my job	-.129	.583
I'm proud of my job	.044	.706
I do not like my job	-.060	-.400
Providing craftsmanship is important to me	.446	.142
It is important to me to perform my job as well as possible	.598	-.059
I feel responsible for mistakes concerning the products I make	.774	.047
I feel responsible for the products I make	.877	-.052

I feel responsible for product improvements	.622	.187
It is important to me to work neatly	.750	-.026
It is important to me to watch, for example, for mistakes and troubles while performing my job	.769	-.055
It is important to me that someone is satisfied with my job performance	.677	-.056

B) Affective and normative commitment to co-workers

**Variance explained:**

Factor 1	35.91
Factor 2	15.03
Factor 3	7.73
Factor 4	7.02

**Factor Loadings**

	Factor 1	Factor 2
When I talk about my co-workers, I will more likely say 'we' than 'they'	.566	.014
I feel 'at home' with my co-workers	.782	-.108
I like dealing with my co-workers	.788	-.059
I talk with my co-workers about non-work related things on a regular basis	.598	.011
I also talk with my co-workers about private things.	.657	.008
I associate with one or more of my co-workers in private life.	.414	.018
When my co-workers have private-life problems, I take it to heart.	.564	-.011
I'm not really interested in my co-workers.	-.474	-.073
Good cooperation is a sign of collegiality.	-.049	-.859



Helping each other is important to me	-0.056	-0.857
I believe relieving a co-worker of (too much) work is a good thing to do	.083	-0.689
We are all responsible for the good running of daily business.	.064	-0.689
Everybody is responsible for his/her own job and not for those of others.	-0.180	.077