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**Nemzetközi tudományos konferencia
a Magyar Tudomány Ünnepe alkalmából**
International Scientific Conference
on the Occasion of the Hungarian Science Festival

Sopron, 2025. november 6.
6 November 2025, Sopron

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FENNTARTHATÓSÁGI ÁTMENET IDŐSZAKÁBAN**

DEVELOPMENT TRAJECTORIES AND NEW DIVIDES IN TIMES OF SUSTAINABILITY TRANSITIONS

Szerkesztők / Editors:

RESPERGER Richárd, SZÉLES Zsuzsanna, TÓTH Balázs István

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CONFERENCE PROCEEDINGS

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Reconceptualizing Organizational Commitment in the Age of Sustainability: A Reflexive Grounded Theory Perspective on Fragmentation and Complexity in the Public Sector

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Abstract:

Demographic change is increasingly placing employers under competitive pressure to attract and retain qualified professionals. The public sector, in particular, is affected by rising workloads and a simultaneous shortage of skilled labor, which negatively impacts working conditions. Organizational commitment is considered a central yet inconsistently defined construct in human resource management. Existing approaches differ in terms of what the construct refers to, how it emerges, and how it is distinguished from other psychological concepts. This conceptual heterogeneity highlights the complexity of commitment. The public sector is shaped by specific cultural, structural, and political conditions that pose particular challenges to the conceptual engagement with organizational commitment – especially in the context of sustainable transformation. At the international, European, and national levels, research has so far been dominated by cross-sectional and quantitative study designs. While these provide valuable descriptive findings, they offer limited insight into the underlying mechanisms and potential meaning structures. This conceptual paper addresses the challenges of sustainable development in the public sector and emphasizes the need for an inductive, theory-driven approach to critically reassess the construct of organizational commitment. Reflexive Grounded Theory offers a suitable methodological framework to systematically capture subjective meaning, cultural variation, and organizational context, and to develop a context-sensitive theory of commitment within public service.

Keywords: commitment, public sector, sustainability, methodology, concept development

JEL Codes: M54, M51, H83, D63

1. Literature review

1.1. Demographic change

Neo-ecology, connectivity, globalization and gender shift are some of the megatrends that are having a significant impact on corporate strategy (Zukunftsinstitut, 2025). The progression of demographic change does not affect every continent equally, but it is a major concern in Europe (Fulde & Köppl, 2020). For example, Africa is expected to experience strong population growth and a high fertility rate of 1.48% in 2050 (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs [UN DESA], 2024a). In contrast, this rate is shrinking to 0.32% in Europe, leading to an aging society (UN DESA, 2024b).

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For years, the total fertility rate in Europe has been below the replacement level (UN DESA, 2024b). In 1950, the European birth rate was still 2.7 births per woman, while in 2025 it will fall to 1.4 (UN DESA, 2025). The decline in fertility is linked to urbanization, rising living standards, and access to education and contraception (Adserà, 2017; De Rose et al., 2019). Fertility rates are higher in rural areas than in urban areas (Kulu, 2013). In this context, the economy, social systems, and societal challenges are influenced by demographic change (Lee & Song, 2025). Growth models predict demographic shifts in the population that have a direct impact on the growth potential of an economy (Weil, 2014).

The population is declining in Eastern and Southern Europe, which is also reflected in the lowest fertility rates in Europe (United Nations [UN], 2022). In contrast, fertility rates are higher in the economically prosperous countries of Northern and Western Europe, and population declines are more sporadic (Newsham & Rowe, 2023). Fertility differentials occur within countries. According to calculations by the UN (2024), Germany and Portugal, for example, will experience a limited population decline in the coming decades. Population stabilization can be used as an opportunity in these countries to eliminate poverty, improve access to health care and social protection systems, and promote education and gender equality. At the same time, the limited decline can serve to promote more sustainable patterns of production and consumption in the economy, establish environmental protection measures, and take action to mitigate the negative effects of climate change (UN, 2024).

Countries can demonstrably have a positive impact on fertility through family policies such as childcare provision, paid family leave, and cash benefits, while at the same time reducing educational disparities (Billingsley et al., 2022; Beaujouan et al., 2016; Greulich et al., 2017; Dalla-Zuanna & McDonald, 2023).

In contrast, the mortality rate is falling worldwide, with mortality improving by 17% compared to 1995. As a result, average life expectancy in 2054 will be 77.4 years. This progress can be attributed to improved healthcare, nutrition, hygiene, and advances in medicine (UN, 2024).

The studies on the economic consequences of a shrinking working-age population are ambivalent. Research findings show both positive and negative effects on growth, productivity, and investment behavior (Lee & Song, 2025).

With the accompanying change in age distribution, the proportion of older people in the population is increasing and, at the same time, the proportion of people of working age is decreasing, which reduces economic growth (Park et al., 2022). Rising life expectancy and technological progress can be used as an opportunity for economic growth. The integration of automation, especially the use of robots in industry, can help older workers make an economic contribution, thereby reducing the contribution to growth made by the most productive age groups. This requires politicians to create incentive systems for companies to exploit the potential of automation to complement human activities. This includes further training for employees, for example, to enable them to operate robots. At the political level, investment is needed in information and communication technology as well as in research and development (Park et al., 2022). In view of demographic change, employee retention is becoming a strategic resource for companies.

1.2. Commitment

Organizations are increasingly asking themselves how they can retain qualified specialists in their companies (Gansser & Godbersen, 2017; Sass, 2019). Hays (2024) is conducting an online survey on this topic in 2024 with N = 972 decision-makers in companies in the DACH association. Participants were asked about suitable measures for employee retention. The results show that around 66% consider a good working atmosphere, 55% market-driven remuneration, 48% flexible working hours, and 42% measures to promote work-life balance to be suitable instruments for employee retention. In another study by IW Köln (2024), N = 5060 employees were

asked about important aspects of their current or future workplace. The survey results clearly show that factors such as job security (77%) and being able to contribute their knowledge and skills to the company (53%) are cited as the most important factors in their workplace. In addition, flexible working hours, a good management culture, and a trusting working relationship with managers are cited as important aspects for promoting loyalty (N = 411) in another study (Institut für angewandte Arbeitswissenschaft, 2023). The available studies show that a variety of measures on the part of the employer can contribute to promoting employee retention. Actual retention, a sense of belonging, including to a specific target group (specific employees or selected departments), expertise, and the willingness not only to remain with the company but also to perform well can be summarized under the term “commitment” (Wolf, 2016).

With employee retention becoming increasingly important in times of skilled labor shortages, the question arises as to which specific target group should be the focus of employee retention measures. The key factor is that the employee's work behavior has a positive impact on work performance, so that the company can benefit from the workforce (Berthel, 2022). Employees with below-average performance should not be addressed in employee retention measures (Ostrowski, 2012). The primary focus should be on existing top performers in the organization who ensure success with their labor. Companies can also use these measures to help bring former employees and top performers back into the company (von der Mosel, 2015). In survey results, 77% of the human resources managers and executives surveyed (N = 300) consider older employees to be of great importance. According to current calculations, demographic change will result in more than a quarter of the workforce retiring in the next five years (Techniker Krankenkasse, 2024).

Staff turnover in a company leads to a loss of routine competence, core competence, and operational cohesion and locomotion (Gmür & Thommen, 2019). When employees leave, knowledge about certain processes and structures can be lost. There is also a risk that specialized knowledge will be passed on to competitors. In this context, companies distinguish between functional and dysfunctional staff turnover (Wolf, 2016). The latter results in additional high costs for the company when the employee is dismissed. These include, in particular, recruitment processes and onboarding and training measures. The costs increase depending on how long a position in the company remains vacant. According to a study by the Federal Employment Agency [Bundesagentur für Arbeit] (2025), the average (new) recruitment period for academics is around 105 days and for skilled workers with vocational training around 162 days. The average cost of a vacant position is €49,500 (Stepstone, 2024).

The unplanned departure of employees can result in tasks being taken over by other employees or left completely untouched. This can lead to valuable knowledge being lost within the organization (Berlinger et al., 2016). Over time, the increased workload can have negative consequences for the health of employees, which in turn is reflected in the company's sickness rate and is not a long-term solution (Brandl & Stetzl, 2013). A study has shown a negative correlation between organizational commitment and sick days (Gallup, 2025a). A lack of commitment among employees not only leads to an increased turnover rate, but is also linked to absenteeism and health problems (Felfe, 2020). The additional workload in everyday working life can lead to more stress, higher absenteeism, and lower productivity (Casico & Boudreau, 2011). It can therefore be said that employee retention measures have a purely economic goal and can create a significant strategic advantage. If there is a high level of employee retention in a company, this has a positive effect on performance and competitiveness (Gallup, 2023b).

It remains to be clarified how employee loyalty is actually experienced in companies. Gallup (2025b) interviewed N = 1,500 employees in Germany on this topic. 13% of respondents stated that they did not feel loyal to their employer, 78% felt a low level of loyalty, and 9% of participants felt emotionally attached to their company. Employee loyalty is therefore very weak. Organizations need to understand how employee loyalty works. Employee loyalty is not a separate area within a company, but develops through the interaction of various factors, instruments, and areas. Companies are increasingly rethinking their approach. As a result, more

and more research findings on retention management are being published (Schulte & Pinger, 2021).

Allen and Meyer (1990) developed a model that has been widely accepted and further developed. The integrative approach is the three-component model. This consists of affective, calculative, and normative commitment. The three commitment mechanisms can work simultaneously and in different ways. Individual components of the model can predict the tendency of employees to leave the company (Meifert, 2013).

If employees have a strong affective commitment, they remain in the organization because they themselves want to and desire to do so. Affective commitment is therefore understood as emotional attachment and identification with the values and goals of the company. Accordingly, the individual needs of the person are satisfied in the course of the characteristics of the work. Commitment can refer to different factors. Research shows that personal identification with the manager is positively correlated with affective commitment (van Vianen et al., 2011; Miao et al., 2012). In addition, a positive correlation between affective commitment and employee performance has been demonstrated (Ng, 2015). Research has shown that as an employee's affective commitment increases, so does their job performance (Schulte & Pinger, 2021).

In this context, a positive correlation between affective and normative commitment was also demonstrated (Schulte & Pinger, 2021). Provided that employees feel emotionally attached to the organization, they usually also feel a normative obligation towards the company. If employees remain loyal to the company for moral and ethical reasons, this is classified as normative commitment. This takes into account a person's personal expectations, norms, and values.

The calculative commitment captures the employee's weighing up of staying with the company against the available alternatives. Investments already made with the current employer and the perceived alternatives are reviewed and carefully weighed up. Employees with a high calculative commitment leave the company when better alternative offers arise (Felfe & Liepmann, 2008). This effect is much more pronounced among highly qualified personnel than among low-skilled employees (Riketta, 2002). Overall, three retention mechanisms can be identified in their distinct forms. Solinger et al. (2008) point out conceptual and empirical inconsistencies in the three-component model. In contrast, Eagly and Chaiken (1993) postulate that a distinction should be made between the goal (the organization) and the behavior (e.g., remaining in the organization). Allen and Meyer's (1990) model contributes to the significance of employee retention. However, the model cannot be used generally to describe organizational commitment. In the following years, numerous models were developed based on Allen and Meyer's three-component model, which are shown in *Table 1*.

Table 1: Presentation of various commitment models

Author	Year	Model
Allen & Meyer	1990	Three-component Modell of organizational commitment
Cohen	2007	A four component commitment model
Keiningham, Frennea, Aksoy, Buoye & Mittal	2015	A Five-Component Customer Commitment Model
Klein, Solinger & Dufлот	2022	Commitment System Theory
Gansser & Godbersen	2023	Four-component model of employee retention
Van Rossenberg, Swart, Yalabik, Cross & Kinnie	2023	Commitment Systems in the cross-boundary work setting
Andersén & Jansson	2024	Commitment capital

Source: Own research

This research presents commitment as a complex and multidimensional construct that can be located at different levels of analysis. Meyer and Allen (1990) define commitment at the individual level and describe it as the psychological attachment of individual employees to their organization. In contrast, van Rossenberg et al. (2023) and Klein et al. (2022) extend this to a systemic perspective that arises from the interdependence of different forms of attachment and target objects. In contrast, Andersén and Jansson (2024) focus on the organizational level with their commitment capital model. Here, employee loyalty is outlined as a strategic resource that contributes to a company's value creation and competitiveness. In summary, it can be said that these approaches do not evaluate commitment as a one-dimensional construct. Rather, commitment is presented as a highly complex construct that is measured at the individual, systemic, and organizational levels.

In addition to numerous models of employee retention, there are also different definitions of the term. In the literature, employee retention is also referred to as commitment or organizational commitment (Felfe, 2020). Against this background, it seems sensible to compare the different definitions below in order to illustrate the conceptual breadth (*Table 2*).

Table 2: Presentation of the range of definitions of commitment.

Author	Year	Definition
Meyer, Irving & Allen	1998	“[...] the three forms of commitment [...]: affective, continuance, and normative. [...] all three forms of commitment presumably increase the likelihood that employees will remain with the organization, the motive for remaining differs (desire, need, and obligation, respectively) and can have implications for employees' work-related behavior.” (p. 32)
Meyer & Herscovitch,	2001	“[...] (a) is a stabilizing or obliging force, that (b) gives direction to behavior [...]. [...] pertains to more specific targets (e.g. organization, occupation, goal) are more variable in the extent to which these two characteristics are specifically mentioned.” (p.301)
Klein, Molloy & Brinsfield	2012	“[...] volitional psychological bond reflecting dedication to and responsibility for a particular target.” (p. 137)
O'Reilly & Chatman	1986	“[...] attachment to an individual, object, group or organization results from identification with attitudes, value, or goals of the model; that is some attribute, motives or characteristics of the model are accepted by the individual and become incorporated into the cognitive response set of the individual.” (p. 492 – 493)
Maxwell & Steele	2003	“[...] the strength of an individual's identification and involvement with a particular organization, characterized by three factors: (a) a strong belief in and acceptance of the organisation's goals and values; (b) a willingness to exert considerable effort on behalf of the organisation; (c) a define desire to maintain organizational membership.” (p. 362)
Moynihan, Wright & Gardner	2011	“[...] refers to a shared mindset and a shared psychological state among a delimited collective of individuals regarding their employer typified by feelings of loyalty and a desire to invest mental and physical energy in helping the organization achieve its goals [...].” (p. 318)

Source: Own research

Meyer et al. (1998) understand commitment as a multidimensional motivational construct that focuses strongly on remaining in the organization. In addition, Meyer & Hersovitch (2001) see commitment as a driver of behavior. Klein et al. (2012) evaluate commitment as an inner conviction and personal voluntary conviction as well as the assumption of responsibility. In contrast, O'Reilly and Chatman (1986) argue that commitment exists in the course of adopting the attitudes, values, and goals of the reference object. In contrast, researchers Maxwell & Steele (2003) understand commitment as identification and involvement, which goes hand in hand with individual and organizational belonging. At the collective, organizational level, Moynihan et al. (2011) evaluate commitment as a collective state associated with energy expenditure and loyalty to the organization.

In summary, it is clear that commitment is a complex construct that cannot be explained by a single factor. Commitment manifests itself as a complex interplay of social, structural, and personal factors.

1.3. Public service

Demographic developments are leading to a shrinking working population in the long term. This not only poses challenges for the economy, but also affects the public sector in particular. Compared to the private sector, the public sector is driven by legal obligations. Any change in the chain of effects not only affects internal procedures and processes, but also directly influences citizens (Wright, 2011). At the same time, the public sector has a special dual role, as it is itself affected by crises and at the same time responsible for crisis management (Galbusera et al., 2021). To this end, it is necessary to create stable structures that not only attract qualified personnel, but also retain them in the long term.

Job security plays a decisive role for 77.6% of respondents (N = 5,060) when it comes to their current and future employer (IW Köln, 2024). The public sector in Germany, for example, ranks second in a ranking and thus has a low turnover rate of 5.8% (Hammermann et al., 2022). The importance of job security may be a factor that explains the slight increase in public sector employment. Over the last 10 years, the public sector has seen an increase of 8.8% in full-time employees and 23.9% in part-time employees. In Germany alone, around 3.4 million full-time and 1.8 million part-time employees work in the public sector (Federal Statistical Office [Statistisches Bundesamt], 2024). In times of increasing uncertainty, crisis, and a dynamic environment, the public sector is perceived as a secure employer, but it is often not the desired place of work (Fulde & Köppl, 2020). The noticeable shortage of employees seems to contradict the shortage of personnel (Hentze & Kauder, 2024).

With population growth increasing by 4.83% over the last 10 years, work intensity is also growing faster than the current employment rate (Federal Statistical Office [Statistisches Bundesamt], 2025; Hentze & Kauder, 2024; Vesper, 2016). More than half of those surveyed at the federal, state, and local levels are dissatisfied with their employer (Köppl & Fulde, 2023). The danger is that low job satisfaction combined with low commitment significantly increases the intention to resign (Meyer et al., 2002). From a human resources strategy perspective, it is therefore crucial to create working conditions that ensure job satisfaction and promote employee retention in the long term.

1.4. Sustainable transformation

Sustainable transformation introduces new organisational expectations regarding ecological responsibility, social wellbeing and transparent governance structures. Within this context, commitment becomes a critical enabler of sustainability-aligned change, as employees must not only remain in the organisation but actively support new strategic directions. Research shows that when public employees perceive compatibility between personal values and sustainability-

focused institutional goals, they demonstrate stronger affective and normative commitment (Stritch & Christensen, 2016; Jung, 2024).

At the same time, purely structural advantages such as job security — although important — are no longer sufficient to ensure long-term employee retention in a constantly evolving environment (Boukamcha, 2021).

Empirical research from the Hungarian context highlights how sustainability must be embedded into organisational routines to secure employee support. Baranyi et al. (2002) demonstrate in the financial sector that the credibility of sustainability commitments – particularly through transparent reporting and ESG-aligned financial practices – strengthens organisational trust and moral identification, both of which support commitment formation. Complementing this, Qian et al. (2025) show that carbon-neutrality strategies succeed when employee engagement and IT-based sustainability innovations are tightly connected. Additionally, Resperger (2023) identifies ESG communication as a factor reinforcing institutional legitimacy during transformation processes.

These results indicate that commitment in the age of sustainability becomes inherently value-dependent: employees remain attached not simply because they *have* a job, but because they believe their organisation contributes positively to society. Sustainable transformation therefore requires redefining commitment as shared responsibility for future-oriented public value.

1.5. Reflexive Grounded Theory

Commitment is already presented as a complex construct in the research landscape today. However, there is a lack of uniform definitions and empirical models that apply to the public sector. Reflexive Grounded Theory (RGT) is a theory originating in the social sciences that aims to develop and uncover theories and models (Breuer et al., 2019). In this context, subjective worlds of meaning are analyzed and social patterns in people's actions are identified. Based on research interactions that take place through the collection of empirical data and a simultaneous self-reflective questioning of the researcher through their own preconceptions, theoretical openness is achieved through the abduction process. The methodological approach is characterized by hermeneutic interpretation and the generation of concepts and theoretical components. Sampling takes place successively in the course of theory development. The focus is on the central heuristic that the researcher constantly searches for differences, contrasts, exceptions, or contradictions. From this, categories can be developed during coding that support the systematization of the models. The research process is iterative and recursive, so that the process steps between sampling, data collection, and interpretation are repeated several times. The RGT method assigns a special role to the researcher, who becomes a subject of self-reflection and research through their own process of discovery and methodological approach. The interaction between the research subject and the researcher can be influenced by personal attitudes and resonances. The RGT method devotes self-reflective attention and sensitivity to the research process in order to support theoretical openness. Through a decentralized and constantly self-reflective approach to primary thought structures and experiences, one's own attitude, level of knowledge, and positioning can be critically questioned. Sociocultural and biographical influences shape the researcher, as do the attitude of the scientific-institutional system and one's professional position. Reflexivity thus requires transparency in one's own role. The aim of this approach is to develop a context-sensitive theory. The research objective is to examine employee retention in the public sector in the age of sustainability and how this is linked to the dimensions of sustainability. In this context, an open and theory-generating method is needed to shed light on the complex and multi-layered processes of employee retention in the public sector.

2. Discussion

The findings of this conceptual analysis demonstrate that organizational commitment in the public sector extends far beyond retention-focused behavioral intentions. In line with existing models (Meyer & Herscovitch, 2001; Klein et al., 2012), commitment must be understood as a psychological and value-based bond, especially under the conditions of sustainable transformation. Public organizations operate under legal mandates, societal accountability, and crisis-sensitivity (Wright, 2011; Galbusera et al., 2021), which makes the preservation and activation of employee commitment a decisive factor for future viability.

Three interrelated conclusions emerge:

1. Commitment is a strategic resource under demographic pressure. Demographic aging simultaneously reduces available workforce and increases public service demand (Lee & Song, 2025; Park et al., 2022). The costs and productivity losses associated with turnover (Cascio & Boudreau, 2011; Wolf, 2016) make affective and normative commitment vital to maintaining service performance – particularly as job satisfaction levels in public institutions remain alarmingly low (Köppl & Fulde, 2023).
2. Commitment is increasingly shaped by sustainability-related legitimacy. Public employees expect their organization to act in accordance with environmental and social values (Stritch & Christensen, 2016; Jung, 2024). Evidence from sustainability-reporting contexts shows that transparency and credible ESG actions strengthen trust and moral obligation (Baranyi et al., 2022; Resperger, 2023). When sustainability communication fails, calculative commitment rises and withdrawal intentions increase (Boukamcha, 2021; Meyer et al., 2002).
3. Meaning-making processes require a qualitative shift in research methodology. Current research is dominated by cross-sectional measurement studies (Solinger et al., 2008), which describe commitment but rarely explain why it emerges in public service. The complexity of multiple target commitments (van Rossenberg et al., 2023) and systemic interdependencies (Klein et al., 2022) signal a need for inductive theory building. Reflexive Grounded Theory (Breuer et al., 2019) enables researchers to uncover how employees negotiate tensions between organizational continuity and sustainability-driven transformation – a core research gap highlighted in this paper.

2.1. Practical implications

To cultivate sustainable forms of commitment, public organizations should:

- Strengthen participatory structures, allowing employees to influence sustainability goals (Schulte & Pinger, 2021; Qian et al., 2025).
- Align HR and ESG governance, treating sustainability engagement as a retention-critical indicator (Baranyi et al., 2022).
- Enhance supervisor–employee value congruence, given its demonstrated effect on affective commitment (van Vianen et al., 2011; Miao et al., 2012).
- Recognize commitment capital (Andersén & Jansson, 2024) as a performance – and resilience-relevant intangible asset.

2.2. Theoretical implications

Sustainability expands the conceptual scope of commitment. It becomes:

- future-oriented (investment in next-generation public value),
- collectively enacted (Moynihan et al., 2011), and
- ethically grounded (O'Reilly & Chatman, 1986).

Thus, understanding commitment in the public sector requires integrating purpose, identity, and legitimacy, into existing models. A reconceptualized framework must address the plural commitments that arise from public employees' simultaneous responsibilities to citizens, institutions, and sustainability goals.

3. Conclusion

In an era of skilled-labour scarcity and societal transformation, organizational commitment becomes a lever of sustainable state capacity. Public institutions will only remain functional if employees believe in – and feel responsible for – the organization's contribution to a sustainable future. Reflexive Grounded Theory provides the methodological pathway to build this new theoretical understanding from lived practice.

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