

The psychological contract, violation of the psychological contract, work-related anxiety and intention to quit of sport coaches in South Africa

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Abstract

Like most employer-employee relationships, the relationship between sport coaches and their employers is governed by legal work contracts which clearly spell out the rights and obligations of the two parties (the employer and the employee). However, formal contracts do not reflect all the exchanges between the employer and the employee in the workplace. The unwritten dimensions (psychological contract) also impacts on coaches' employment relationships which is often a neglected area of research. Hence, the purpose of this study was to examine whether the psychological contract, violation of the psychological contract and work-related anxiety predict sport coaches' intention to quit the coaching profession. The study is located within a quantitative research design. The respondents consisted of 151 (n=151) sport coaches sampled through a convenience sampling technique in the Gauteng province, South Africa. The PSYCONES Scale (employer obligations, employee obligations, violation of psychological contract), Work-related Anxiety Scale and Intention to Quit Scale were used to collect data. Descriptive and regression analysis were used to examine the relationship among the constructs. The findings reveal that violation of the psychological contract and work-related anxiety of sport coaches predict intention to quit. This study advocates the notion that, like in other organisational contexts, it is essential for employers in the sport industry to identify and fulfil the psychological contracts of sport coaches in the management of employee relationships between coaches and their employees.

Keywords: Psychological contract, violation of psychological contract, work-related anxiety, intention to quit.

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Introduction

Increased global competition, economic fluctuations, and changing social environments in which many organisations operate has resulted in the employee-employer relationship undergoing fundamental changes (Roehling, Cavanaugh, Moynihan & Boswell, 1998). It has become more important now than ever

before to redefine and reconstruct the changing contract between employees and employers. Rousseau (2011) argues that because of the ambiguity, changes and work-related anxiety associated with these changes, it has become extremely important to ensure a healthy and progressive employee-employer relationship. Whilst the formal dimension of the employment relationship is often the reference point in the management of an employment relationship, it does not necessarily extensively address and manage employees' expectations in the workplace (Slabbert, 1997).

Bendix (2010) opines that employment relationships essentially involve people who have been placed in a specific relationship with one another due to their mutual involvement in a work situation. In the context of sport, the relationship between the sport coach and the sport organisation is one such example. Li, Zhang, Restubog and Huang (2012) describe the employment relationship between employees and employers as a legal link through which reciprocal obligations, duties and rights are established between the parties. The foundation of such a relationship is the employment contract which may be viewed as a reciprocal agreement in terms of which the employee promises services to the employer in return for remuneration (Nagel et al., 2011). Within the employment contract exists the social contract as well as the psychological contract.

Recently, sport organisations have evolved into big business operations which attract huge sponsorship, participation and spectatorship. In a sport organisation, the coach is a central figure, having the responsibility of providing athletes the opportunity to realise excellence in a range of technical, physical and moral areas (Hardman, Jones & Jones, 2010) as well as stimulating and sustaining high quality participation and performance (Fletcher & Scott, 2010). Pelsler-Carstens and Surujlal (2013) argue that sport organisations and governing bodies of sport have a duty under the law to protect and support sport coaches well-being because of the stressful, complex and uncertain environment within which they operate. Given the fact that sport coaching has evolved into a recognised occupation and profession, a need has arisen for research into the employment relations of sport coaches (Dixon & Bruening, 2007). Previous research on the psychological contract in the sport setting has focussed on volunteer administrators and sport event volunteers (Harman & Doherty, 2011). There is a paucity of studies which have examined the content and impact of the psychological contract in sport settings and research is needed to fill this void (Grobler, 2011).

The psychological contract and violation of the psychological contract

The psychological contract has experienced exponential growth in the past two decades as an area of research attention to understand the employment relationship (Coyle-Shapiro & Parzefall, 2008). It fundamentally emphasises the

role of reciprocity in understanding exchange relationships between the employer and the employee (Conway & Coyle-Shapiro, 2012). Furthermore, it promotes the development of the social exchange relationship by perpetuating the fulfillment of perceived rights and obligations in the relationship (Freese & Schalk, 2008). In this relationship, one party's contribution depends on the prior contribution of the other party (Conway & Coyle-Shapiro, 2012).

Van Boxtel (2011) identified six important areas through an extensive review of the literature that pertain to employer obligations in terms of the psychological contract. These are *career development* which refers to employees' opportunities for promotion and development within the organisation (e.g. coaching on the job); *job content* which refers to the provision of challenging, varied and interesting work (e.g. autonomy); *financial rewards* which refer to the provision of appropriate rewards (e.g. job security); *social atmosphere* which refers to the provision of a pleasant and cooperative work environment (e.g. managerial support); *work-life balance* which refers to the respect and understanding of the employer for the employee's personal situation (e.g. vacation periods); and *organisational policy* which refers to the involvement of the employees in the policies and decision making in the organisation (e.g. open communication).

Employees' obligations comprise two content areas (Van Boxtel, 2011; Freese & Schalk, 2008; De Vos, Buyens & Schalk, 2003). These are *in-role obligations* which refer to the tasks that are described in the job description (e.g. providing good coaching service, interacting with parents and the media, developing training/coaching programmes); and extra-role obligations which refer to the tasks that do not belong to the tasks described in the job description (e.g. working long hours; working on weekends, working after hours). Within these areas also are a number of obligations that are possible elements of a psychological contract.

Knights and Kennedy (2005) argue that violation of the psychological contract occurs when one party perceives that the other has failed to fulfil its obligations or promises. When the employee perceives that the organisation has failed to fulfil one or more obligations relating to the psychological contract, a cognitive aspect of violation emerges. An emotional response also accompanies the violation. Employees may develop feelings of betrayal, distress, anger, resentment, a sense of injustice and wrongful harm (Morrison & Robinson, 1997) which, in turn, may result in attitudinal and behavioural responses such as job dissatisfaction and lowered organisational commitment (Knights & Kennedy, 2005).

Work-related anxiety

Work-related anxiety is a universal phenomenon experienced globally (Spielberger, 2006). It is closely linked to work stress which is a measure of one's well-being at work (Bricheno, Brown & Lubansky, 2009). It adversely affects work performance and has a profound effect on an individual's well-being. High levels of work-related anxiety are often associated with stress and depression (Newbury-Birch & Kamali, 2001) and is likely to contribute to higher levels of dissatisfaction with one's job, lower morale and poorer work performance (Cozens, 1987).

The sport coach is an extremely influential individual who enjoys a powerful position in a sport organisation (Stirling & Kerr, 2009). Bawa (2010) posits that the sport environment provides the coach with the challenge of developing a winning team while simultaneously providing a positive experience and a conducive training environment. Sport coaches are regularly exposed to sport competition anxiety which stems from the scrutiny of the media, other coaches, fans, spectators and their management. The poor performance of the team, as well as fluctuating achievements in a highly competitive environment, result in sport coaches experiencing higher levels of work-related anxiety than other employees in a sport organisation.

Intention to quit

Intention to leave or quit is defined as the "subjective estimation of an individual regarding the probability of leaving an organisation in the near future" (Cho, Johanson & Guchait, 2009: 374). According to Vandenberg and Nelson (1999), an employee's intention to leave the organisation is a strong predictor of turnover. If employees feel threatened by feelings of insecurity in the workplace or are not guaranteed of their position in their workplace, one of the options they may consider is leaving the organisation (Van der Vaart, Linde, de Beer & Cockeran, 2015). They may lose trust in their employer and their loyalty to the organisation would be diminished. This may influence them to pursue better employment opportunities (De Cuyper & De Witte, 2008). De Cuyper, Mauno, Kinnunen and Mäkikangas (2011) argue that if employees believe that they stand to gain more by leaving the organisation than by remaining, the decision to quit the organisation may be easy.

Employees' intention to quit is influenced by various factors within an organisation. Although there is little consistency in what determines an individual's intention to quit, some of the variables which contribute to this phenomenon include organisational commitment, team commitment, team support, organisational support, training and development opportunities, job-related stress as well as contracts. Mitchell, Holtom, Lee, Sablinski, Lee and

Erez (2001) opine that intention to quit is a direct antecedent of actual turnover. Kim, Chelladurai and Trail (2007) argued that when coaches cannot be retained, problems regarding quality in a sport organisation are likely to occur. Continuity of programmes may be hampered or halted. There is no guarantee that new coaches would necessarily be better coaches (Petitpas, Cornelius, Van Raalte & Jones, 2005).

The study examines whether the psychological contract, violation of the psychological contract and work-related anxiety predict sport coaches' intention to quit the coaching profession among coaches in South Africa.

Based on the literature review the following hypotheses are formulated:

H₁: The psychological contract predicts coaches' intention to quit their job.

H₂: The violation of the psychological contract predicts coaches' intention to quit their job.

H₃: Work-related anxiety predicts coaches' intention to quit their job.

Methodology

The study is located within a quantitative research paradigm using a structured questionnaire. A comprehensive literature review of the social, psychological and employment contract, work-related anxiety and intention to quit was undertaken.

Sample and procedure

The sample in the study comprised sport coaches from the Gauteng province of South Africa. Coaches in possession of a valid (formal) contract with a sport organisation and employed by their current organisation for a minimum period of two years, were approached to participate in the study. This was necessary so that employees could sufficiently reflect on their employee-employer relationships during their tenure in the sport organisation.

The researchers identified an "information-rich coach" (Isabirye & Dhurup, 2013) who had access to sport organisations and sport coaches at the provincial level, and was employed at a sport organisation to conduct the fieldwork. The field worker who was trained by one of the researchers in fieldwork survey administered the questionnaire to the participants. The fieldworker was remunerated for his services. Participants were identified at different stadia at which they coached as well as at clubhouses of different clubs. In order to improve the response rate, the questionnaires were completed in the presence of

the fieldworker after training sessions or at the different clubhouses. One hundred and seventy five (N=175) questionnaires were administered, of which one hundred and fifty one (n=151) questionnaires were fully completed and subsequently used for data analysis.

Instrument

The PSYCONES questionnaire (Isaksson, 2005) was used to collect data for the study. An additional section requesting demographic information such as the type of contract (permanent or temporary), gender, age, coaching experience, type of sport, qualification, hours of work per week, supervision and union membership was included in the instrument.

To measure the psychological contract, two scales were used. The 10-item *Employer Obligations Scale* (Isaksson et al., 2003a), scored on a 6-point frequency-rating scale ranging from 0 (*No*) to 5 (*Yes, and promise fully kept*) was used to gather data on the promises and commitments that the employers sometimes make to their employees. Typical questions in this scale were: "Has your organisation promised or committed itself to provide you with interesting work?" and "Has your organisation promised or committed itself to help you deal with problems you encounter outside work?" The 16-item *Employee Obligations Scale* (Isaksson et al., 2003a), scored on a 6-point frequency-rating scale ranging from 0 (*No*) and to 5 (*Yes, fully kept promise*), was used to determine some promises and commitments that employees sometimes make to their organisation. Examples of items in this scale were: "Have you promised or committed yourself to go to work even if you don't feel particularly well?" and "Have you promised or committed yourself to work enthusiastically on jobs you would prefer not to be doing?"

The 6-item *Violations of Psychological Contract Scale*, measured on a 5-point scale, ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*very*) (Isaksson, et al., 2003a), was used to request responses to six feelings concerning the perception of the psychological contract (happy, angry, pleased, violated, disappointed and grateful). Previous studies (Isaksson et al., 2003b; Rigotti & Mohr, 2003) on violation of the psychological contract explain that trust and fairness can be indicators of violation of the psychological contract.

In the PSYCONES instrument, work-related anxiety was included in the 10-item *Affective Well-being Scale*. Items in this scale were scored on a 5-point frequency-rating scale ranging from 1 = "rarely or never" to 5 = "very often or always". Examples of questions asked were "In the past few weeks, how often have you felt uneasy regarding your work" and "In the past few weeks, how often have you felt tense regarding your work".

The *Intention to Quit Scale* measured on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 = "strongly disagree" to 5 = "strongly agree" was used to measure employees intention to leave the organisation. A typical question in this scale was "These days, I often feel like quitting".

Data analysis

Descriptive statistics (means, standard deviation, skewness and kurtosis) were computed. In addition, the reliability and validity of the questionnaires were established through internal consistency (Cronbach alpha) values and validity through regression analysis (predictive validity). Regression analysis was also performed to determine whether the psychological contract and violation of the psychological contract predict intention to quit and also if work-related anxiety predict sport coaches' intention to quit their organisations.

Results

Sample composition

The majority of coaches were permanent employees (n=94; 62.3%). More males (55.6%) than females (43%) participated in the study. The majority of the coaches either agreed or strongly agreed (n=112; 74.1%) that their current job was their preferred job. In addition, most of the coaches either agreed or strongly agreed (n=105; 69.6%) that their current occupation was their preferred occupation. Almost half of the coaches (n=74, 49%) belonged to a union.

Descriptive statistics and reliability

Table 1 provides the descriptive statistics and Cronbach alpha coefficients of the measuring instrument. The reliability values showed acceptable internal consistencies, >0.70 (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994).

Table 1: Descriptive statistics and Cronbach alpha coefficients of the measuring instruments

Measuring instrument	Mean	SD	Skewness	Kurtosis	α
Employer Obligations	3.5	1.10	-1.03	-0.02	0.93
Employee Obligations	3.7	0.45	-1.15	5.36	0.70
Violation of Psychological Contract	2.7	0.37	0.06	-0.87	0.88
Work-related anxiety	2.7	0.49	-0.09	-0.87	0.77
Intention to quit	2.4	0.60	0.24	-1.13	0.84

Regression analyses

Regression analysis was performed in order to ascertain the predictive influence of the independent variables on the dependent variable. In Table 2, Model 1

employers' obligations, employee obligations, violation of the psychological contract and work-related anxiety were entered into the regression equations as independent variables and employees' intention to quit was entered as the dependent variable.

Table 2: Multiple regression analyses - with intention to quit as dependent variable

Model	Independent variables	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
		B	SE	Beta		
1	Employer Obligations	0.03	0.03	0.08	1.16	0.25
	Employee Obligations	0.00	0.03	0.01	0.09	0.93
	Violation of PC	0.33	0.07	0.38	4.44	0.00*
	Work-related anxiety	0.39	0.07	0.45	5.71	0.00*

* $p < 0.01$. Dependent variable = Intention to quit. $F = 43.44$; $R = 0.74$; $R^2 = 0.55$. Adjusted $R^2 = 0.54$

The results of the regression analysis indicate that psychological contract did not predict coaches' intention to quit. In terms of the beta weights employee obligations ($\beta=0.01$) and employer obligations ($\beta=0.08$) made insignificant contributions to coaches intention to quit their jobs. Hypothesis H₁: *the psychological contract predicts coaches' intention to quit their job is therefore not supported.*

The regression results provide evidence that a violation of the psychological contract predicts employees' intention to leave their current employer. The beta weights for the violation of the psychological contract ($\beta=0.38$) seem to significantly influence coaches intention to quit their jobs. Hypothesis H₂: *the violation of the psychological contract predicts coaches' intention to quit their job is therefore supported.*

The regression analysis shows that violation of the psychological contract and work-related anxiety predicted sport coaches intention to quit their job. Hypothesis H₃: *work-related anxiety predicts coaches' intention to quit their job is therefore supported.*

Discussion

These results of this study find concurrence with Keyser's (2010) earlier study which revealed that employer obligations and employee obligations, as part of the psychological contract predicted negative intentions of employees to quit their job. It, therefore, seems that the psychological contract, an employee-employer relationship does influence coaches' intention to quit their jobs. A plausible reason for such an outcome could be attributed to the notion that such a

contract is unwritten and are simply convictions relating to mutual obligations between an employee and the employer. They are not legally enforceable, but purely represent unexpressed commitments of both the employee and the employer in a working relationship (Rousseau, 1995). Hence, this strong sense of mutual obligation seems to generate a propensity among employees to remain with their current employer. Given that the psychological contract is unwritten, yet mutual may not necessarily generate any level of tension. However, when there is a breach of the psychological contract, decreased loyalty sets in the employee-employer relationship creating mistrust and stress (Zhao, Wayne, Glibkowski & Bravo, 2007).

These results are not surprising as Robinson and Rousseau (1994) and Coyle-Shapiro (1999) attest to such association between the violation of the psychological contract, and employees' intention to leave their current employer. Turnley, Bolino, Lester and Bloodgood (2003) observed that a breach of a psychological contract by the employer does not only damage an employee's feeling of security, but also leads to mistrust between the employer and the employee. Further, such violation's threatens employees' self-image, eroding their commitment to the job and the organisation in which they work. Joshy and Srilatha (2010) aptly affirm that when employees encounter a contract violation, their satisfaction with both the job and the organisation itself may decline. Therefore, employees may perceive that the employment relationship is no longer mutually beneficial, and their self-assurance in staying in the organisation may gradually wane. A study conducted by Suazo, Turnley and Mai-Dalton (2005) revealed that employees' perceived violation of the psychological contract negatively impacted on their commitment and they were ready to quit their jobs. Such a breach may not only affect the employee concerned but has the susceptibility to create a trickle-down effect to other employees who can be negatively affected by way word-of mouth (Bordia, Restubog, Bordia & Tang, 2010).

Guest and Conway (2002) affirm that one of the predictors of work-related anxiety was the violation of the psychological contract. For a psychological contract to be honoured between the parties, it is necessary to acknowledge that violations of the psychological contract arouse anxiety which may result in coaches showing a propensity to quit their current job. Isabirye and Dhurup (2013) observed that like employees in other sectors, coaches find themselves enveloped by family and work-related pressures which affected the way they worked and called on their employers to take cognisance of such challenges to assist them to share joint responsibility to overcome their employer-employee relationship in the workplace. These spill-overs have now moved from being unidirectional to bi-directional in its measure often creating strain in work-family and family-work fronts (Dubihlela & Dhurup, 2013). Within coaching circles where the win-loss record is often a primary evaluator of the success of a sport

coach's performance, further pressures are exerted on coaches to succeed and in the process exacerbating anxiety (Dhurup & Mahomed, 2013). In summary, it appears that the psychological contract between an employer and employee within the sport coaching domain, is not binding, open-ended and relational (long-term), and paternalistic in nature as opposed to being transactional (short-term). Violation of this mutual understanding within the psychological contract may create an inclination of sport coaches to leave their current employer. Moreover, if anxiety is built in, sport coaches may also show a propensity to leave their current employment.

Recommendations

Arising from the results of the study are a few recommendations. For a relationship to develop positively between an employee and an employer, the psychological contract should be founded on sincerity, reciprocity and trust. This requires management support, allowing the employer and employee to communicate openly in all aspects of their work domains. In this way, an open trust-relationship is developed and nurtured, thus strengthening the psychological contract between the parties.

The management of sport organisations should play a mediating role in the relationship between their sport coaches and their immediate superiors in order to reduce work-related anxiety so that the psychological contract is fortified. This may influence coaches positively so that they are less likely to leave their current organisations. Since coaching is considered a high pressure job because of time demands and the burden of winning, coaches become central to an athlete's or team's success. They are constantly in the scrutiny of the media, other coaches, fans, spectators, and management of sport organisations. Therefore, managers of sport organisations should constantly emphasise positive coach-supervisor relationships and create an enabling environment so that these relationships are enhanced in a healthy work environment. In this way, work-related anxiety among coaches could be reduced and coaches may show commitment to remain in the organisation.

Limitations of the study and implications for further research

The study made use of a quantitative research design. While this approach is noteworthy and has been used in previous studies, the sample size and geographic makes it prone to limitations. Hence, the generalisability of the results to coaches, in general, must be viewed with caution. A larger sample size over a wider geographic location could yield much more rewarding results especially in terms of testing more variables in the study with regard to mediating and moderating variables through a multivariate structural model. In this regard, various factors which may contribute to coaches' work-related

anxiety and their intention to quit such as job satisfaction, leadership style, autonomy, career development and career satisfaction could be explored. Future studies could be extended to include these factors. Furthermore, this study was a cross-sectional study and, therefore, it was not possible to control for effects over time and time may have impacted on sport coaches perceptions. Longitudinal studies are warranted so that the effects could be determined over time.

Conclusion

The study makes an important contribution to the psychological contract, violation of the contract, anxiety among sport coaches and their intention to leave their current organisation. Although an implicit psychological contract may prevail in sport organisations, the mutual fidelity needs to be tested and challenged. It is important for sport organisations to fulfil the promises made to sport coaches either implicitly or explicitly so that a trust-relationship is inculcated between coaches and their immediate supervisors. Sport organisations should be mindful of the fact that any violation of the contract on their part may increase the chances of coaches quitting the organisation. This may have serious implications of coach retention and the sport organisations potential to attract new high quality coaches in the future.

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