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### ► To cite this version:

Antoine Pennaforte, T. Judene Pretti. Developing the conditions for co-op students' organizational commitment through co-operative education. Asia Pacific Journal of Cooperative Education, 2015, 16 (1), pp.39 - 51. hal-02103148

**HAL Id: hal-02103148**

**<https://cnam.hal.science/hal-02103148>**

Submitted on 12 Jun 2019

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# Developing the conditions for co-op students' organizational commitment through cooperative education

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Based in a French context, this research investigates the link between the French cooperative education (co-op) system and students' organizational commitment. Following a quasi-experimental design with a control group, in a longitudinal approach, the study focuses on under-baccalaureate, undergraduate and graduate students. Results show that in the French context, co-op is an attitudinal process able to develop students' affective organizational commitment under two conditions. The first is to build co-op as a way to socialize the co-op students with the organization. The second is to support co-op students during their studies and also after graduation. From a co-op research perspective, this study presents another model of co-op and proposes to build a link between co-op and organizational behavior and to think of co-op as an incubator for developing high performers within organizations. (*Asia-Pacific Journal of Cooperative Education*, 2015, 16(1), 39- 51).

Keywords: Cooperative education, organizational commitment, perceived support, organizational socialization, longitudinal

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## INTRODUCTION

One of the aims of employers when recruiting a new employee is to find the best fit between the individual and the organization. Because recruitment is a significant upfront cost (Peretti, 2005), employers who can find the best fit get a higher return on their investment realized through the retention and high performance of that employee. The employer needs to train and to support the new employee's socialization within the organization, (Schein, 1968). During this time, the performance is not optimal (Van Maanen & Schein, 1979). After this organizational socialization, employers have to retain the newcomer at least three years to obtain a good return on their recruitment, training and socialization investment (Kammeyer-Mueller, Wanberg, Rubenstein & Song, 2013). The risks of turnover, of a poor organizational fit, and of inadequate performance are significant. This is particularly true in a labor market where there is a "talent war" (Boudreau and Ramstad, 2002) with a higher need for skills and work-appropriate attitudes and behaviors.

To address these organizational needs (minimizing recruitment costs, maximizing fit, socialization and performance), work-integrated learning (WIL) programs are beneficial, especially cooperative education (co-op) (Pennaforste, 2011). WIL is defined as "educational activities that intentionally integrate learning within an academic institution with practical application in a workplace setting, relevant to a student's program of study or career goals" (Sattler & Peters, 2013, p.13). An example of one form of WIL is cooperative education. It is a program of "semester-long paid work placements that are an integral part of an academic degree program based on alternating academic and work terms" (Kramer & Usher, 2011, p.4). Through the alternation between the job and the classroom, co-op develops work-readiness (Bates, 2005), or employability (Drysedale et al., 2007; Freudenberg, Brimble, &

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Vyvyan, 2010) skills, and can create a special relationship between an individual and an organization.

There is an opportunity, through co-op education for students to develop behaviors strongly associated with high performance and high performers. Co-op students can develop a specific bond with the organization and may want to stay in the same organization after graduation. In the organizational behavior field, the concept of organizational commitment describes the relationship between an individual and his or her work environment (Meyer & Allen, 1991; Thévenet, 2004). What is this relationship? How is this bond developed during a co-op placement? Does the development of organizational commitment lead to higher performance in co-op students, in the way it does for other employees (Vanderberghe, Landry, & Panaccio, 2009)?

The objective of this study is to understand under what conditions the co-op system leads to the development of organizational commitment. More specifically, the study examines how co-op, as defined in the French model, leads to organizational commitment.

To answer this question, we used a longitudinal quasi-experimental design with a control group. There are two stages in this study. The first stage aimed to investigate co-op as an attitudinal process. The second stage examined the link between co-op and organizational commitment, all, in a French context. The French co-op system is based on the same foundation as the previously mentioned definition of co-op (Kramer & Usher, 2011). Students alternate between classroom and workplace, and are paid and are working towards a degree (under-baccalaureate, undergraduate or graduate). But there are two additional key characteristics of the French co-op system to note. One, French companies with more than 250 employees are obligated to hire co-op students as 4% of the payroll. Two, a work contract exists between the employer and the co-op student for 1 year minimum to 3 years.<sup>2</sup> Each university or school decides the rhythm of alternation (1 week in the classroom, 3 weeks in industry, or 2 days/3 days, or 2 months/2 months) and the companies choose the institutions with which they wish to collaborate. A minimum wage is mandatory by level of study and the work term experience must be associated with the students' field of study. This paper will present the relevant literature, the method employed, the findings of the study along with a discussion of the results, limitations and some managerial implications.

## LITERATURE

### *Organizational Behavior and Cooperative Education*

The organizational behavior field focuses on the understanding of the link between individuals and organizations. In this research, the theories mobilized are based on the social exchange theory, norm of reciprocity (Gouldner, 1960), and on the organizational equilibrium, advantage/retribution theory (March & Simon, 1958). Additionally, this study is based on the human capital theory (Schutz, 1961; Becker, 1964) which assumes that organizations develop and train individuals to enhance both strategy and skills in the aim of a balanced and sustainable organizational relationship.

According to these theories, co-op could be examined as a process where the co-op students develop a specific relationship to their organizations measured through the construct of

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<sup>2</sup> Since March 6, 2014, a new law extends the duration of the contract

organizational commitment. In order to understand the impact of co-op on organizational commitment, two components should be examined. The first component is an integration tool (Richardson, Kaider, Henschke, & Jackling 2009), an organizational socialization (OS) process (Eisenberger, Huntington, Hutchison, & Sowa, 1986). The second component is a system mobilizing several stakeholders to support the students, developing the students' perception of support by the organization (perceived organizational support, POS) or the supervisor (perceived supervisor support, PSS).

#### *Organizational Socialization and Cooperative Education*

Co-op could be seen as a time of socialization between the organization and the student. The concept of organizational socialization provides an understanding of the transition from a previously experienced situation to a new unknown situation. It is a process by which the employee responds to emerging external and internal contingencies (Schein, 1968). It is a process where the newcomer's adjustment to work and assimilation into an organization change as a consequence of their gaining new knowledge and learning the behavioral patterns expected from a member of a particular organization (Feldman, 1981). Socialization helps newcomers adapt to their work environment by facilitating their adjustment to the organization's values and norms; by clarifying role identities; by developing job and performance related skills and capacities; and by helping them learn who to turn to for information needed to interpret organizational uncertainties (Kozlowski, 1995).

Organizational socialization allows the development of several socialization tactics (Ashford & Black, 1996; Rollag, 2004) in several domains: individual, organization, team and work (Chao, O'Leary-Kelly, Wolf, Klein, & Gardner, 1994; Taormina, 2004, Holton, 2005). These domains relate to organizational values (objectives, culture), team values (rules, relationships), work (skills, knowledge), identity, self-confidence and role understanding. Here, we define organizational socialization as how newcomers learn the ropes, the skills needed to assimilate to an organization (Schein, 1968) and to hold a role, during this co-op socialization process. Our first hypothesis (H1) is: participation in co-op is positively linked to organizational socialization.

#### *Perceived Organizational Support and Cooperative Education*

Co-op mobilizes several stakeholders (e.g. supervisor, co-workers, advisors, faculty) around the co-op student. All these stakeholders support the co-op student who perceives an organization's positive valuation of their contribution to the organization. Co-op students become grateful for the various supports they are given and feel indebted to their organization (Coyle-Shapiro & Parzefall, 2009). This social exchange approach maintains that on the basis of the norm of reciprocity, workers trade effort and dedication to their organization for such tangible incentives as pay and fringe benefits and such socio-emotional benefits as esteem, approval, and caring (Blau, 1964; Eisenberger, Huntington, Hutchinson, & Sowa, 1986). This support, referred to as perceived organizational support (POS) is defined as "employees global beliefs concerning the extent to which the organization values their contributions and cares about their well-being" (Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002, p. 698). The support depends on the employee's perception of the human resource policy and processes established by the top management (Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002). The perception of support should "fulfill socio-emotional needs, leading workers to incorporate organizational membership and role status into their social identity" and "strengthen employees' beliefs that the organization recognizes and rewards increased performance" (Rhoades &

Eisenberger, 2002, p. 699). POS leads to a felt obligation to help the organization reach its objectives (Eisenberger, Armeli, Rexwinkel, Lynch, & Rhoades, 2001). By helping other employees carry out their jobs more effectively, such efforts would aid the organizations, as well as other employees, leading to greater productivity (Bell & Menguc, 2002). Our second hypothesis (H2) is: participation in co-op is positively linked to perceived organizational support.

#### *Perceived Supervisor Support and Cooperative Education*

Organizational support is often personified by the figure of the supervisor, especially the "tutor"<sup>3</sup> who supports the co-op student during the work term. The support provided by the tutor acts as a mediator between classroom learning and on the job training (Lankau & Scandura, 2002). During co-op, the tutor welcomes, introduces and positions the newcomer in the role expected by the organization. This tutor role, similar to the role of a supervisor, could work according to the same principles as the perceived organizational support. Supported by his or her supervisor/tutor, individuals might develop favorable behaviors for the organization. These effects are significant over a long-term period (Chao, 1997). Perceived supervisor support (PSS) is defined as "employees' global beliefs concerning the extent to which their supervisor values their contributions and cares about their well-being" (Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002, p.698). Our third hypothesis (H3) is: participation in co-op is positively linked to perceived supervisor support.

#### *Organizational Commitment and Cooperative Education*

The concept of commitment aims to explain the relationship between an individual and his or her work and environment (Meyer & Allen, 1991; Thévenet, 2004). A complex concept, commitment covers commitment to organization, work or career (Morrow, 1993), team (Randall & Cote, 1991), profession, union (Cohen, 1993) or in a special target (Locke, Latham, & Erez, 1988). Meyer and Herscovitch (2001, p.301) define commitment as a "force that binds an individual to a course of action of relevance to one or more targets".

Here, we focus on organizational commitment which includes several facets (Morrow, 1993). The affective approach represents an emotional link between the individual and his or her organization (Allen & Meyer, 1990). This psychological attachment is characterized by a strong bond between the employee and the aims and values of the organization, a wish to act for the organization and a strong desire to stay as a member of the organization (Porter, Steers, & Mowday, 1982). The normative approach represents the social conventions between the individual and his or her organization (Paillé & Yanat, 1999). It includes all the internalized normative pressure which push an individual to act in the best interests of the organization, not for a personal benefit, but because it is good and moral to act like this (Ajzen, 1988). The continuance approach represents the costs associated with leaving the organization. The investments of an individual would be lost if the individual decides to leave the organization. Here, there are two sub-components. One referring to the difficulty

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<sup>3</sup> In the French co-op system, a « tutor » (volunteer or paid and named by the management) is given to each co-op student to support the newcomer during the work term, especially to learn the ropes. The "tutor" works in the work term organization. He or she may or may not be the student's supervisor. In this study, the tutor is always the supervisor.

of finding alternative employment (low alternative - LoAlt) and one reflecting the sacrifices associated with leaving (high sacrifice - HiSac) (Bentein, Vandenberghe, & Dulac, 2004).

This tridimensional definition of organizational commitment is well established (Meyer & Allen, 1991, 1997) even though a new approach is now proposed by Klein, Mollow, and Brinsfield (2012). This new approach defines commitment as a “volitional psychological bond reflecting dedication to and responsibility for a particular target” (Klein et al., 2012, p.137). In this approach, “commitment has the same meaning and operates similarly across targets” (Klein, Cooper, Mollow, & Swanson, 2014, p.223) and separate definitions and measures for different targets are unnecessary.

Several antecedents nurture the development of organizational commitment, which are active during co-op employment. For example, organizational commitment is promoted through organizational socialization (Allen and Meyer, 1990; Bentein, Stinglhamber & Vandenberghe, 2000). A fourth hypothesis for this research (H4) is: organizational socialization during co-op is positively linked to organizational commitment. According to Meyer, Stanley, Herscovitch, & Topolnytsky (2002) and Rhoades and Eisenberger (2002), there is a direct link between organizational commitment and perceived organizational support. According to Stinglhamber and Vandenberghe (2003), there is a direct link between organizational commitment and perceived supervisor support. Our fifth hypothesis (H5) is: perceived organizational support during co-op is positively linked to organizational commitment. Our sixth hypothesis (H6) is: perceived supervisor support during co-op is positively linked to organizational commitment.

Our theoretical design contains 6 hypotheses split into 2 stages (Figure 1). The first stage is built to describe which variables are developed during co-op. The second stage is built to figure out how these variables develop the conditions for organizational commitment.

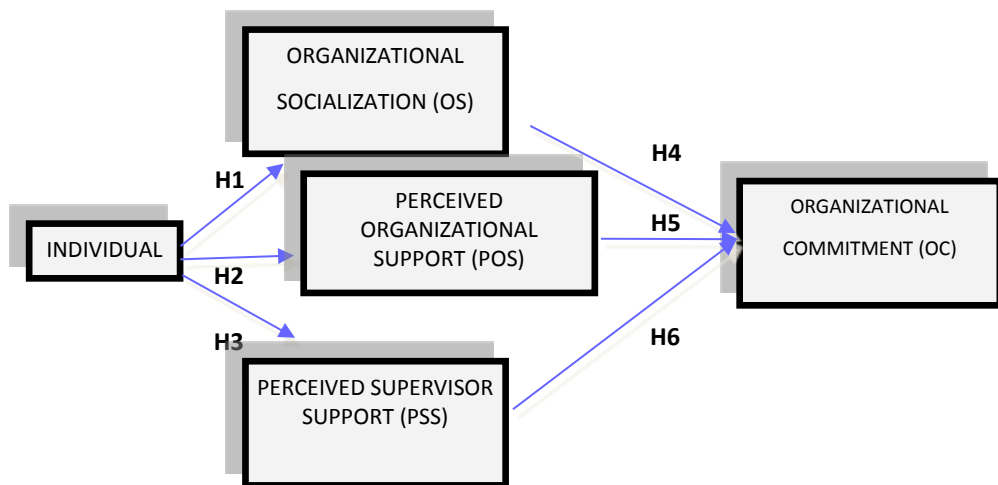


FIGURE 1: Organizational commitment process through co-op

## METHOD

### *Procedure and Participants*

We use a hypothetic-deductive method close to a quasi-experimental approach, with a control group and a longitudinal design (Gavard-Perret, Gotteland, Haon, & Jolibert, 2008; Drysdale & McBeath, 2014). It is not a purely longitudinal study because the data collection was run only during one year, but we used 3 measurement times (beginning, middle and end of studies on the same sample, plus four years after graduation on a second sample). Our analysis aims to compare data between the periods and rebuild the evaluation (Menard, 1991).

To examine the validity of the model, each phenomenon is analyzed at its own level (Klein, Dansereau, & Hall, 1994) with a multi-level approach, using SPSS. For the examination of the relationship between demographic variables and the model, a Fisher test was performed. For the first level: student T-test of average difference, with a "trust indicator" of 95% was performed. For the second level: to explain the effects of the independent variables (OS, POS, PSS) on dependent variable (OC), Pearson correlation and linear regression were performed.

We collected our data in a French context<sup>4</sup>, in a French services company, on three organizational levels (operator, middle manager and top manager) involved in co-op expecting to be qualified respectively as a bus driver (underbaccalaureate level), a supervisor (undergraduate level), and a manager of a business unit (graduate level) for the test sample. The control group sample contained the same organizational levels but with employees who joined the company but who did not take co-op. We checked the possibility of comparison between the two samples with a high level of description (gender, study level, duration of employment). The samples have been selected with a census method and following the advice of Henry (1990) for dealing with small samples, for the longitudinal sample we selected all co-op students employed at the company for the sample.

The first two measurement times were collected in a classroom of 101 students and nearly all students agreed to participate leading to a response rate of 98%. The third measurement time was collected online for the alumni three years after graduation (288 alumni). The response rate was 53%. The control group test was run on a sample of 700 people. The response rate was 39%. We used online data collection to increase the response rate (Weible & Wallace, 1998). Our sample of actual co-op students contained 84% of male, which is representative of the employee population in this kind of services industry (Baruel-Bencherqui, Le-Flanchec, & Servayre, 2009). In the co-op sample 45% were bus drivers, 45% were middle managers and 10% were top managers. The age average is 26 years old. 55% of the respondents work around the French capital, the others all over France.

### *Measures*

All four scales (organizational commitment, organizational socialization, perceived organizational support, and perceived supervisor support) are from the literature, validated in a North American context and adapted and validated in French context. We also used a demographics questionnaire which contained the control variables.

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<sup>4</sup> Data have been collected between 2009 and 2010.

*Organizational commitment:* Organizational commitment was measured with two scales. The affective and normative facets were measured with 12 items from Allen and Meyer (1991). The continuance facet (both HiSac, High Sacrifice, and LoAlt, Low Alternative) was measured with six items from Stinglhamber, Bentein, and Vandenberghe (2002) adapted in French context by Guerrero (2005). Participants responded to each item using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from definitely agree to definitely disagree. An example item was "my organization has a great deal of personal meaning for me". Cronbach Alpha reliability scores of the total scale range from .72 to .77.

*Organizational socialization:* Organizational socialization was measured with 10 items from Lacaze (2005). Four items measured task mastery, three items measured role understanding and three items measured the social integration. Participants responded to each item using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from definitely agree to definitely disagree. An example item was "I know very well how to get things done in this organization". Cronbach Alpha reliability scores of the total scale range from .77 to .85.

*Perceived organizational support:* Perceived organization support was measured with 10 items from Eisenberger et al. (1986) adapted in French context by Alis and Dumas (2003). Participants responded to each item using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from definitely agree to definitely disagree. An example item is "my organization really cares about my well-being". Cronbach Alpha reliability scores of the total scale is .94.

*Perceived supervisor support:* Perceived supervisor support was measured with four items from Rhoades, Eisenberger & Armeli (2001), adapted in French context by Manville (2006). Participants responded to each item using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from definitely agree to definitely disagree. An example item was "my supervisor cares about my opinions". Cronbach Alpha reliability scores of the total scale is .88.

*Demographics questionnaire:* Participants completed a short demographics questionnaire designed to collect data on their program (co-op vs. non co-op), level of study, age, gender, employment location and duration of employment.

## RESULTS

### *Results of the First Stage: The Relationship Between Demographic Variables and the Model*

The results reveal a weak relationship between all the demographic variables and the model. For the students' sample, at the beginning of co-op, only the organizational socialization is influenced by the age ( $F=4,351$ ;  $p<.01$ ) and the degree ( $F=7,530$ ;  $p<.01$ ). At the end of co-op, only the organizational commitment is influenced by the degree ( $F=8,777$ ;  $p<.01$ ). For the control group, all the variables are influenced by the duration of employment (OS:  $F=2,830$ ;  $p<.01$ ; PSS:  $F=3,645$ ;  $p<.01$ ; OC:  $F=4,546$ ;  $p<.01$ ) but only the organizational socialization and organizational commitment are influenced by age (OS:  $F=3,043$ ;  $p<.01$ ; OC:  $F=5,479$ ;  $p<.01$ ). Those results mean that we only need to keep the degree and duration of employment (for the control group) to the test the model, following the recommendations of Becker (2005), if the control variable has no influence on dependent variable, it is better to not integrate it to avoid too big a model.

### *Results of the First Stage: The Description of the Co-op Model and the Comparison Between Samples*

The results revealed a significant effect of co-op on organizational socialization (0.17;  $p<.01$ ), perceived organizational support (-0.24;  $p<.05$ ) and perceived supervisor support (-0.15;



$p < .01$ ) between the beginning and the end of studies in co-op. After graduation, the support increases strongly (POS: 0.40;  $p < .05$ ; PSS: 0.45;  $p < .05$ ). The results controlled by the degree show that the organizational socialization (social integration and performance proficiency) is faster for the undergraduate and graduate levels as compared to those in under-baccalaureate programs ( $-.12$ ;  $p < .01$ ). Perceived organizational and supervisor support are higher for higher levels of degree ( $-.44$ ;  $p < .01$ ). The organizational socialization has a lower score for co-op students than for the control group ( $-.37$ ;  $p < .05$  at the beginning;  $-.20$ ;  $p < .05$  at the end). However, the perception of support is higher for co-op students than for others (POS T1: 0.45\*;  $p < .05$ ; T2: 0.21;  $p < .05$ ; PSS: T1: 0.14;  $p < .05$ ; T2:  $-.01$ ; not statistically significant). The results show the validation of the first stage model with an adjustment of the hypothesis.

#### *Results of the Second Stage: The Link Between Co-Op Model and Organizational Commitment*

Analysis shows a relationship shift in the process to develop organizational commitment, after graduation. The model (Figure 2) is validated with some adjustments. After graduation, the adjusted model explains 47.4% of the variance of affective commitment, 35.8% of the variance of continuance commitment and 48.6% of the variance of normative commitment.

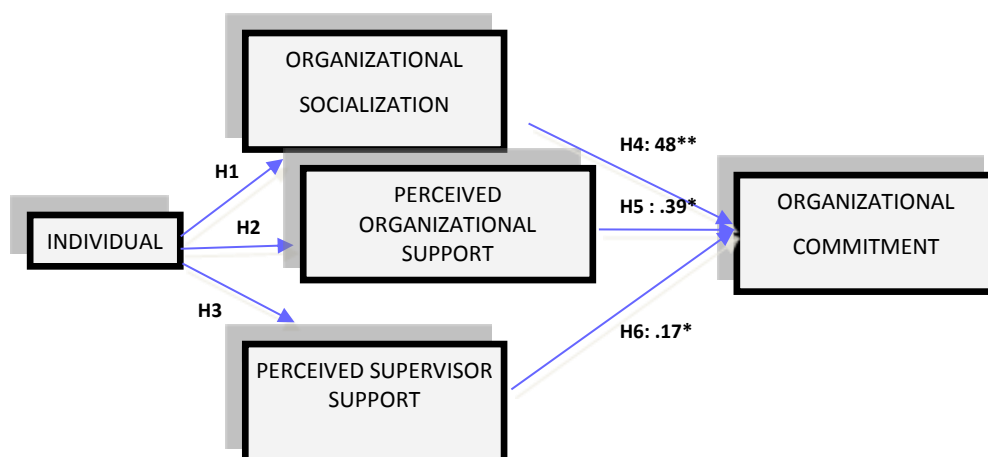


FIGURE 2: Organizational commitment antecedents building during co-op

The model explains the conditions for the development of the different facets of organizational commitment (Figure 2). The affective facet is positively influenced by organizational socialization (.48;  $p < .01$ ), the perceived organizational support (.29;  $p < .05$ ) and negatively by the perceived supervisor support ( $-.25$ ;  $p < .05$ ). The continuance facet (perceived sacrifice sub-scale) is positively influenced by organizational socialization (.19\*;  $p < .05$ ) and perceived supervisor support (.17\*;  $p < .05$ ). And finally, the normative facet is positively influenced by organizational socialization (.28\*;  $p < .05$ ) and perceived organizational support (.39;  $p < .05$ ). Three years after graduation, the organizational commitment is only influenced by the perception of organizational and supervisor support which explain 34.8% of the variance of the affective facet. In the control group, the model explains only 30% of the variance of organizational commitment (affective, 30%; calculate, 30%; normative, 27%).

## DISCUSSION

### *Through Co-Op, the Perception of Support Leads to a Sustainable Relationship*

Co-op promotes the development of organizational commitment, due to the high level of support perceived by student and the motivation to learn, to obtain a job and earn a degree (Cheng, 2001). Co-op provides the opportunity to connect and understand individual and organization needs and expectations, with the potential to develop a sustainable relationship (Bentein et al., 2000). During co-op, perceived organizational support, (peers, colleagues, HR), is as important as the perceived supervisor support to help to learn the role. POS develops the individuals and PSS provides recognition or negative feedback. Here, sometimes, the roles are not clearly defined, impacting the success of organizational socialization.

Organizational socialization is the first step which helps the co-op student learn the ropes of the organization. This process, very active during co-op as defined in the French model, shows that the higher the level of education (undergraduate and graduate) the quicker they master their tasks and the faster their social integration. However, understanding their role is still slow because of the complexity of the role. After one year of co-op, individuals still do not have a complete understanding of their role which is combined with a decrease in the perception of support. Individuals have to become autonomous (Hodges, Smith, & Jones, 2004) at the end of co-op and the supervisor and the organization can keep their distance from the co-op student to test the student's abilities in the role. If the student succeeds, the company may want to offer the student a job following graduation. At that moment, the perception of support increases, reinforcing the link between individual and organization to develop organizational commitment.

After organizational socialization, trust continues to build between the individual and the organization, supported by the supervisor. Here, organizational commitment has been developed and the former co-op student doesn't look for another job (Allen & Meyer, 1990). Since there is a relationship between organizational commitment and performance (Meyer & Allen, 1991; Vandenberghe, Landry, & Panaccio, 2009), the performance is high (Campbell et al., 1990) and he/she contributes to building positive relationships with the team (Organ, 1977). Those who participate in co-op develop stronger professional behaviors more quickly than their non-coop peers (Gardner & Choi, 2007).

### *From a Training Tool to a Human Resource Management (HRM) Tool*

Through participation with co-op programs and students, organizations expect quick socialization, a high level of performance and an intention to stay. The results of the study demonstrate that in order to achieve those desirable outcomes, consideration needs to be given to the time and the support provided to co-op students. Also, organizations seek the professionalization of their future employees to obtain a high return on their investment and increase their human capital (Becker, 1964). The more an organization invests in developing the skills of its individuals, the more the affective organizational commitment increases (Tremblay, Cloutier, Simard, & Chenevert, 2005).

Cooperative education is able to create the conditions for affective organizational commitment and maintaining a sustainable relationship between the co-op student and the organization for at least 4 years. The link with the organization is attitudinal. It is a strength of the co-op system that students and the organization establish a strong link, but it is also a

constraint when the student graduates and doesn't experience the same level of support. Co-op is also a tool for an organizational retaining strategy, not in the sense of retention but in the sense of a mutual adjustment and desire to work together (Stinglhamber & Vandenberghe, 2004) as explained by our model with the affective commitment. Finally, co-op could be seen as a system to develop affective commitment and to develop the potential of individual, for a long term period. In other words, co-op could position itself as an HRM tool to develop talent.

#### *Generalization, Limitations and Further Research in an Organizational Behavior Approach*

Generalization of these results can be made but are limited to the service sector and organizations with highly structured programs for bringing in co-op students to their companies across France. It is recommended that future studies build on these findings across different industries and with less structured programs for co-op student support.

#### CONCLUSION

The study shows that co-op is an attitudinal process able to develop affective organizational commitment, with two main conditions: thinking of co-op as a way to socialize the co-op students with the organization and supporting co-op students during and after work terms. From an organizational behavior perspective, co-op is an investment able to increase individual and organizational performance over a long term period. From the co-op perspective, this study presents a model showing how co-op is connected to the development of organizational commitment and socialization. The study presents another model of co-op and proposes we think of co-op not only as a skill incubator but as an incubator of high performers for organizations, able to build a balanced relationship between the individual and the organization.

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This article has been produced with the support of FNEGE Junior Professor Award.

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The Asia-Pacific Journal of Cooperative Education publishes peer-reviewed original research, topical issues, and best practice articles from throughout the world dealing with Cooperative Education (Co-op) and Work Integrated Learning/Education (WIL).

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The Journal's main aim is to allow specialists working in these areas to disseminate their findings and share their knowledge for the benefit of institutions, co-op/WIL practitioners, and researchers. The Journal desires to encourage quality research and explorative critical discussion that will lead to the advancement of effective practices, development of further understanding of co-op/WIL, and promote further research.

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