

# Why some of your old work commitments never seem to go away

January 18 2018, by Jeff Grabmeier

---

You can quit work commitments if you want - but some of them never really leave you, new research suggests.

In a study of 420 employees representing a wide variety of occupations and [work](#) settings at three organizations, researchers found that commitments that workers no longer had were still lingering in their minds.

"It was clear to us that past commitments were still affecting employees," said Howard Klein, lead author of the study and professor of management and human resources at The Ohio State University's Fisher College of Business.

While these effects could be positive or negative, the study revealed that many employees harbor negative feelings about long-gone obligations that their supervisors may not realize.

"We need to find out what managers can do to mitigate the [negative effects](#) of these prior commitments that may be holding people back in their jobs," Klein said.

The study appears online in the journal *Academy of Management Discoveries*.

While there has been a lot of research on commitment in the workplace, Klein said he believes this is the first to examine the impact of past

commitments.

The researchers called these "quondam commitments." Quondam means "that which once was." Workplace commitments examined in the study included those to organizations, supervisors, workplace teams, projects, goals or occupations, among others.

The research involved surveys of employees at a health care facility, a financial institution and a large, unionized manufacturing plant. As this was an exploratory study, the researchers asked employees just two questions: The first asked participants to describe in a few words a specific thing that they were committed to at work but were not anymore. The second asked them to say why they no longer had that commitment.

After reading the responses, the researchers sorted them into 11 broad reasons for why commitments ended. The most common was changes in work circumstances, which included about 30 percent of all responses. This could involve changed jobs or positions or shifted responsibilities.

"The fact that changes in work circumstances was the No. 1 reason was surprising to me," Klein said. "We all talk about the rapidly changing workplace, but I still didn't expect it to be the most cited reason for commitments ending."

The second most common reason, cited 16 percent of the time, was over-commitment. This included conflicting responsibilities or there simply not being enough time or capacity to fulfill all of one's obligations.

"Over-commitment at work hasn't been given the attention it deserves. Our findings suggest we need to look at this a lot more closely," he said.

"There is evidence that having commitments facilitates well-being

because it gives you a sense of purpose. But commitments become a problem when employees feel they have too many to keep up."

Indeed, "negative effects on well-being" was another category of identified reasons for no longer being committed.

Several of the other reasons cited for quondam commitments also had troubling implications for companies, including "negative perceptions of other personnel," "negative perception of leadership/management," and a "significant negative work event."

A strong negative quondam commitment could make employees reluctant to fully commit to new projects, supervisors or goals in their jobs, Klein said.

"The closest thing to this that has been studied is romantic relationships. Workplace commitments are not the same, of course, but there are parallels," he said.

"People talk about how they have been burned in the past and don't want to make the same mistake again. Something similar could happen to employees whose past work commitments didn't end when, or the way, they wanted."

Klein said that, as an exploratory study, this research asks a lot more questions than it answers. But it points out the need to take quondam commitments seriously in the workplace.

"We need to figure out when a quondam [commitment](#) is going to be positive or negative for both [employee](#) and/or the organization, and when its effects are going to linger or dissipate quickly," he said.

"Companies today often need to pivot quickly and they need employees

to change commitments just as fast. How managers deal with these changes for their employees, and the effects of prior commitments, is crucial."

Provided by The Ohio State University

Citation: Why some of your old work commitments never seem to go away (2018, January 18) retrieved 28 July 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2018-01-commitments.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.