

Post-exit loyalty: Is it a fantasy?

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ABSTRACT

This study offers a first approach to explore the phenomenon of post-exit loyalty in knowledge intensive companies. The objective of this study is to address two questions: what is going on in the post-exit relationship of ex-employees and their former organizations (ex-organizations) and what are the affects of these ex-employees towards their ex-organizations.

To this end, we adopted a qualitative approach and conducted focus groups using an online electronic chat tool, MSN Web Messenger. 19 ex-employees of 7 consultancy firms were invited to participate in 7 chat sessions. Out of the qualitative analysis, three general categories emerged, namely positive affect, negative affect and instrumental attachment towards the former employer.

For many researchers on loyalty, personal sacrifice is an essential element of loyalty within the organizational context. Results suggest that this may not be applicable for the post-exit situation. Even when some sacrifice is involved, ex-employees still indicate the importance of mutual benefit and their striving for win-win situations.

The findings imply that consultancy firm management may need to consider (post)-exit management and alumni activities. Suggestions for future research are provided.

POST-EXIT LOYALTY: IS IT A FANTASY?

Alvesson (2000) described people who still feel attached to their former employer even after leaving. He labelled this phenomenon post-exit loyalty. This phenomenon is believed to have significant implications for the knowledge intensive industry in which networks and inter-organizational linkages are crucial (Alvesson, 2000). Yet, we know little about post-exit loyalty.

Maintaining positive relationships with former employees might be beneficial and valuable for both the former employee and their former organization. From an employer's positive point of view this former employee may become client, may be re-employed in the future (Rousseau, 1998) or may become a kind of 'ambassador' for the company, who will positively promote inter-organizational linkages between the former employer and his or her new working environment. From a contemporary management point of view, inter-organizational linkage might even be crucial to keep ahead of the competition in the knowledge intensive industries (Gibbons et al., 1994). The ability to learn about new opportunities requires participating in them, hence a wide range of inter-organizational linkages is critical to knowledge diffusion, learning, and development (Powell, 1998). Although there continues to be debate about the definition of the concept of knowledge intensive companies (Alvesson, 2000; 2004), the category generally refers to companies where most work can be said to be of an intellectual nature and where well-educated, qualified employees form the majority of the work force (Alvesson, 1993; 2000). In this sense, knowledge intensive companies are very much dependent on their employees' knowledge, because this represents "the most significant resource of the company" (Alvesson, 2000, p. 1103).

Ex-employees could have a huge potential in terms of valuable linkage with other organizations. After all, these persons were once part of this organization. They know the

organization from within and therefore may be able to point out which linkages will benefit the organization the most. If ex-employees have positive feelings towards their ex-employers, they may be willing to entrust their most valuable new contacts to their former employers, creating valuable (new) networks for their ex-organizations.

So far, prior research lacks empirical evidence of this post-exit phenomenon. This study is a first approach to explore this phenomenon within Dutch knowledge intensive companies from the perspective of the ex-employee. We believe that this research is of academic interest because of several reasons. First, not many researchers, expand their research beyond the organizational context after employees leave; the post-exit situation. There is only limited empirical research on the antecedents and outcomes of identification of ex-employee (alumni) with their former firm leading to intention to benefit this firm (Iyer et al., 2007) and there is (to our best knowledge) no empirical research on loyalty of the ex-employee with their former organization.

Secondly, prior research also focuses on documenting the negative effects of staff turnover, and understanding the cause of the high turnover in order to reduce its dysfunctional consequences (e.g. Griffeth et al., 2000). Knowledge intensive companies generally are characterized by high levels of turnover. For example, Iyer et al. (1997) report 40-50% of staff of large public accounting firms typically departing within three years. Over time, these high turnover levels result in relatively large databases of ex-employees for these organizations and thereby potentially creating large intertwined valuable new networks. Little research has been conducted on favourable outcomes of alumni for companies such as former employees becoming potential clients, and the relationship between the former employee and the firm becoming a valuable marketing (Iyer et al., 2007), or information and learning resource (Powell, 1989) for the company. Insight in what makes (or prevents) these ex-

employees benefiting their ex-organizations, would give organizations implications on how to manage their ex-employees' loyalty, even after employment.

Third, this study provides an alternative approach to examining knowledge intensive organizations' processes and behaviours from the perspective of the former employees rather than the current employees. Insight in the processes with former employees may have implications for the management of the current workforce as well.

ORGANIZATIONAL LOYALTY, SOCIAL IDENTITY AND ORGANIZATIONAL COMMITMENT

As little is known about the post-exit loyalty construct, we draw upon the body of knowledge of the potentially related constructs: organizational loyalty, social identity, and organizational commitment.

Organizational Loyalty

The first construct we review here is loyalty. Loyalty studies are present in the fields of management (e.g. Hirschman, 1970; Alvesson, 2000), organizational psychology (e.g. Scott, 1965; James & Cropanzano, 1994) and social psychology (e.g. Zdaniuk & Levine, 2001; Van Vugt & Hart, 2004). There are many definitions and representations of loyalty in literature. One way to look at loyalty is that loyalty is regarded as the absence of exit (Hirschman, 1970; Alvesson, 2000). This view suggests that loyalty is only about continuation or discontinuation of the employment relationship (Alvesson, 2000). Zdaniuk & Levine (2001) talk about leaving or staying as manifestations of loyalty. Instead, they define loyalty in terms of group welfare versus personal or individual welfare. Loyalty is defined as helping the group while harming oneself, whereas disloyalty is defined as harming the group while helping oneself (Zdaniuk & Levine, 2001, p. 502). For these authors lack of concern for

personal welfare is a necessary part of loyalty. This is also part of Alvesson's (2000) definition of loyalty as "being altruistic and prepared to make sacrifices in favour of the organization" (Alvesson, 2000, p. 1107). Some authors place more emphasis on membership and belongingness in their definitions. James and Cropanzano (1994) define group loyalty as the "adherence to a social unit to which one belongs, as well as its goals, symbols, and beliefs" (p.179). Scott (1965) viewed loyalty as "being a devoted member of the group, never criticizing it to outsiders, and working hard to get ahead of other groups" (p. 24). Loyalty has been used as a label for in-group bias (e.g., Abrams & Brown, 1989; Burton, 1990). According to these definitions, behaviour is loyal to the extent that it enhances (or at least is meant to enhance) group welfare (Zdaniuk & Levine, 2001). Finally, Van Vugt and Hart (2004) define loyalty as a "complex, multifaceted construct, consisting of emotive (strong positive emotions like happiness, joy and empathy), cognitive (e.g. depersonalized trust), as well as behavioural elements" (p. 586). Behaviourally, loyalty may be evidenced in the sacrifices that people make to help their group, including staying when it is personally costly" (Levine & Moreland, 2002; Van Vugt & Hart, 2004, p. 585).

Social Identification

Next, we review the construct social identity. Within the general category of loyalty, Alvesson (2000) distinguishes instrumental loyalty and identification-based loyalty. Typical means of reassuring instrumental loyalty are legal agreements and money, as well as other compensation (Alvesson, 2000). Pure forms of identification based-loyalty, opposite from instrumental loyalty do not primarily involve money or contracts. Identification based-loyalty is a matter of perceived similarities, shared positive emotions, and social bonds. On a cognitive level, the self-definition is defined in "social identity terms" as part of how one conceives one's self, rather than as affiliation with and attractiveness felt for a group of

people (Turner, 1984). Identity provides answers to the question: “Who am I?”(Asforth & Mael, 1989). Social identity theory originated from the studies of Tajfel (1978) and Tajfel and Turner (1979) regarding the psychological basis of intergroup relations. The basic idea behind social identification is that in certain circumstances individuals can perceive themselves in terms of their membership to social groups, social identity, rather than in terms of personal attributes, personal identity (e.g. Asforth & Mael, 1989; Riketta, 2005; Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Tajfel et al, 1971; Haslam, 2004).

Rousseau (1998) identifies two levels of cognitive identification: situated and deep structured identification. Situated identification is an elementary form of identification, it is a perception of a discrete work setting, created by situational cues signalling shared interests, and maintained as long as the cues persist (Rousseau, 1998; Meyer et al., 2006). Deep structured identification refers to the cognitive schema formed in work settings across roles, over time, and across situations that leads to congruence between self-at work and one's broader self-concept (Turner, 1978). Such organizational identification can form part of an individual's self-concept by altering individuals' mental models of self in enduring ways (e.g. as United Parcel Service employees say they 'bleed brown' out of a sense of attachment to the company, symbolized by the brown uniforms they wear) (Rousseau, 1998). According to Rousseau (1998), situated identification is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for deep structured identification.

Organizational Commitment

Finally, we review the construct organizational commitment. Organizational commitment is, like organizational loyalty, a complex multifaceted concept linking the individual to a collective and having implications for behaviour of relevance towards that collective (e.g. Allen & Meyer, 1990; Olson-Buchanan & Boswell, 2002). Contrary to social

identity, which has to do with social foci (other people, groups and larger collectives) only, both commitment and loyalty could have social and non-social foci. One might be committed to a job or loyal to a cause.

In literature there is little agreement on the difference between organizational identity (Albert & Whetten, 1985) and organization loyalty or organizational commitment. On one hand some authors equate identification with commitment (see Riketta, 2005 and Chisalita, 2008, for an explanation of this conceptual overlap). On the other hand, many researchers assert that identity is not the same concept as commitment (Asforth & Mael, 1989; Van Knippenberg & Sleebos, 2006; Meyer, Becker & van Dick, 2006). According to Van Knippenberg and Sleebos (2006) the fundamental difference between organizational commitment and organizational identification is that commitment refers to a relationship in which the individual and the organization are separate entities psychologically, whereas identification implies that the individual and the organization are one. According to Chisalita (2008) evidence from social psychology field shows that (cognitive) identification is an antecedent for affective commitment (e.g. Bergami & Bagozzi, 2000; Foreman & Whetten, 2002) and for loyalty to the group (Ellemers, Spears & Doosje, 1997; Zdaniuk & Levine, 2001; Van Vugt & Hart, 2004; Iyer et al., 1997; Ashfort & Mael, 1989). Besides the similarities between loyalty and commitment, there seems to be a difference in core essence of these concepts. Commitment is about binding of a person to a target and course of action. In this study, we adopt the view that loyalty is more than commitment: it is about a person (emotionally) having positive emotions and empathy associated with the target and (behaviourally) working hard for the benefit of the target and (sometimes) even making sacrifices on behalf of the target.

Towards the Post-Exit Situation

What does this all mean for the post-exit situation? Although not empirically studied, many researchers theorised that the identification process might go further than the employment contract. Individuals' desire to maintain the continuity of their self-concept over time and across situations provides a theoretical explanation for ex-employees' continued identification with (and predisposition to benefit) their past employer (Iyer et al., 1997). In addition, Rousseau (2004) and Meyer et al. (2006) suggest that when deep structured identification (opposite from situated identification) is strong, attachment to an organization could continue even after employment ends.

However, what are "loyal alumni" in a contemporary management point of view? For many authors, personal sacrifice is an essential element of loyalty within the organizational context. It is doubtful whether a pure form of personal sacrifice without considering your own or your new environment's welfare in any way would be likely in the post-exit situation. If personal sacrifice is not an obvious characteristic of loyalty in the post-exit situation, what is? Prior research on loyalty and related constructs suggests that "feelings" (e.g. "emotions", affects) play a major role within the organizational context. We propose that these "feelings" or "affects" play a major role, beyond this organizational context, in the post-exit situation. In order to shed more light on this proposed post-exit phenomenon, this study has the objective to find out what is going on within the relationship between ex-employees and their ex-organizations. Specifically, we aimed to identify what the affects were of ex-employees towards their former organizations.

The review of the earlier introduced constructs organizational loyalty, social identity, and organizational commitment, gives some direction in identifying factors that may be relevant in terms of studying post-exit loyalty. These factors are *tenure*, *post-exit period* and the *freelancer*. *Tenure* is the first important factor considered in this study. According to

Rousseau (2004) the more enduring, deeply structured identity is developed over time. Alvesson (2000) also reports on the “endurance-time issue” associated with the loyalty-concept. It is plausible that the longer the employee worked for the ex-organization, the more or deeper he or she identifies with this organization.

Time is also an important factor in an alternative way. *Post-exit period* is about how long ago an employee left the organization. As an identity is considered to be formed over time (e.g. Rousseau, 1998), it may also somewhat fade away in time, even when deep-structured identity is considered. The theoretical explanation may be that as an individual’s self-concept is defined in terms of membership in multiple social groups; it is likely that the salience of the social group based on the individuals’ more distant employment declines with the passage of time, because other social groups are likely to become more prominent. According to Mael and Ashforth (1992, p. 108) in their study on college alumni “the sense of shared destiny and belongingness would be expected to fade somewhat [as time passes].” However, the empirical evidence involving college alumni offers mixed results (Iyer et al., 1997). Nevertheless, this factor is considered in this study.

The final factor to consider is the current working environment. Alvesson (2000) argued that loyalty problems could arise because of conflicting or competing identities. Different current employment contexts of the ex-employees may influence their post-exit loyalty. It seems plausible that it is “easier” to stay loyal to an ex-organization, which is in a very different line of business or is a (potential) client than an ex-organization that is a (potential) strong competitor. On one hand, it therefore seems important to differentiate for example in the contexts of (potential) client organizations and (potential) competing organizations. On the other hand, this may not be fruitful: Practically, it may become a challenge to define the categories exhaustively, because the possible employment contexts may be numerous. However, an even more important argument is that this view presumes a

rigid view of inter-organizational relationships. We believe that considering another organization only as a competitor (or just a potential client), is a too limited view in a growing knowledge intensive network economy. As mentioned before, competitors might as well be the partners or clients of the future or the other way around. Yet, a specific group of ex-employees may be important to identify: *freelancers*. In today's consultancy business, it is common practice that consultants, who leave, start working as a freelancer and stay involved with the ex-organizations. Many freelancers depend on the consultancy organization for their assignments, especially when they have just started their own business. However, there could be more than just an economical explanation. As many freelancers work alone, they may be more loyal to their former employers (in comparison an ex-employee who is working in an organization with more than one person) due to the fundamental human need to belong to others (Pratt, 1998; Tajfel, 1979). As a conclusion, these freelancers are of special interest in this study.

METHOD

Research Design

This qualitative study follows an exploratory strategy in the spirit of the grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). This grounded approach is manifested in this study, by starting the data collection without a formation of an elaborative theoretical framework first. It is also manifested in the analysis, where categories of coding information were generated by engaging in ongoing comparisons between the data and literature (Saunders et al., 2000).

In an inductive approach, multiple focus group sessions were organized. A focus group, originally designed as a marketing research tool, is defined as a “carefully planned series of discussions designed to obtain perceptions on a defined area of interest in a permissive, non-threatening environment” (Krueger & Casey, 2000, p.5). According to

Krueger and Casey (2000), focus groups can provide trustworthy naturalistic data that also lead to important insights about human behaviour. Multiple focus groups sessions were organized, as the data of a single focus group may not be reliable (Krueger & Casey, 2001). One of the specific features of a focus group discussion is that participants were selected based on characteristics they share, as opposed to differences among them (Krueger & Casey, 2000).

Seven organizations that were initially approached for this research expressed their interest and willingness to contribute to this research. But these organizations also expressed their concern in the amount of time these focus groups would take from their employees, in relation to their high workload and other priorities due to the current economic situation (recession). Many authors report on the difficulty of getting access to respondents as one of the major problems in organizational research (e.g. Bryman, 1989). In order to deal with this access issue, we decided to use an online electronic chat tool: MSN Web messenger. By using this online tool, we were able to reduce the time invested by the participants and this also enabled us to gather information within a relatively short timeframe. To our best knowledge, using this type of tool is still uncommon in the research practice. Anandarajan & Anandarajan (2009) do report the unprecedented growth of social networking tools such as MySpace, Facebook and LinkedIn, primarily designed for social purposes. These authors report that only in the last year they have begun to see the emergence of research-based social networking tools. Because of this still being quite an experimental process, much effort has been put in creating a procedure that would be suitable for the chat sessions.

Sample

Participants were selected based on meeting with one particular predetermined similar characteristic. The types of characteristics were based on the above review of prior research. The chosen characteristics for the focus groups were: *tenure*, *post-exit period* and *freelancers*. In addition, a specific focus group for *managers* was formed.

Tenure refers to the total time span an employee worked for the ex-organization. It would have been interesting to create focus groups with participants from several different tenure periods but because of the (limited) timeframe of this research and access difficulties, we managed to form one group: four to six years. Based on typical turnover rates (within three year) presented by Iyer et al. (2001), we propose that people who stayed more than three years might be of special interest. We limited this group to a maximum of six years in order not to create too much differentiation within the focus group (Krueger & Casey, 2000).

Post-exit period refers to the period between the current date and the date of exit. Based on Alvesson (2000) mentioning loyalty problems to arise after one year, and the above-mentioned argumentation for “tenure”, we decided to form two focus groups of similar time elapses: $1 \leq 3$ years and $4 \leq 6$ years.

Although it would be interesting to distinguish many different employment contexts, we chose to limit the different contexts to one context: *freelancer*. We propose that the relationship between the freelancer and ex-employing organization differs substantively from the relationship between the ex-employee who joins another organization, and the former organization. We also included respondents of both types of organizations (competing and client organization) to our other focus groups and were aware of any signs of specific differences in their responses.

The last focus group is with *managers* who maintain contacts with ex-employees. As managers are supposed to be in contact with several ex-employees, they might be able to

point out some relevant similarities and differences between them. The view of the managers might lead to new insights of the post-exit phenomenon.

Access to the participants for the focus groups was gained through personal contacts with the directors of seven Dutch consultancy organizations. Three of the seven organizations (A, B en C) eventually participated in identifying potential respondents. Both ex-employees and employees who met the criteria of the needed focus groups of these organizations were approached. In addition, current employees were approached, based on the assumption most of them would have one or more ex-employers. They were asked to participate from the context of their last ex-employer. By including current employees, the group of potential respondents was increased substantially.

The (ex-) employees were told that they would participate in a one-hour chat session concerning their relationship with their ex-employment organization. Most participants were volunteers recruited by aimed personal contact and e-mails, a few applied voluntarily after reading the general call for participants. In total 143 persons were approached¹. Of these 143 persons were 119 participants (ex-) employees of organization A, 10 of organization B, 6 of organization C, and 8 from other different organizations. Of the 143 persons in total 40 persons (17 wrong email-addresses; 86 no response) offered to participate, and after definite planning in total 24 participants² could be planned in eight chat sessions. There were in total

¹ Five organizations were asked to look in their existing register of employees and ex-employees which persons potentially met the criteria. Only one organization had a (almost) complete overview of their ex-employees, next to their current employees (organization A). Only organization A submitted to whole list to the research so that every potential participant could be invited personally by the researchers. The other four organizations had incomplete overviews of ex-employees. Of these four, one organization withdraw because of the impact of the economic crisis on their business, another organization did offer access in approaching their employees and ex-employees by sending through an email with notice of this research, but nobody responded to this call. Another organization offered access to some specific ex-employees, but this was not possible within the existing timeframe.

² During this planning, organization C (6 person) withdraw completely due to priority reasons of the management because the economic situation. The other 10 were cancelled, because it was not possible for them to participate on the planned date of their focus group discussion.

three last-minute cancellations (no-shows), bringing the total realized sample up to 21 participants. Of these 21 participants, 14 were female and 7 were male. They all had an academic or higher educational background. The following table (Table 1) gives an overview of the focus groups and their characteristics.

Table 1 Realized focus groups

<i>Realized focus groups</i>	<i>Numbering in timeframe of this study</i>	<i>Realized number of participants</i>
1. Tenure: $4 \leq 6$ years	1 st group	3
2. Time elapse: $1 \leq 3$ years	2 nd group	2 (1 no-show)
3. Time elapse: $4 \leq 6$ years	4 th group	3
4. Freelancer 1	3 rd group	3
5. Freelancer 2	8 th group	2
6. Managers	7 th group	2 (1 no-show)
7. Mixed group 1	5 th group	3
8. Mixed group 2	6 th group	2 (1 no-show)
<i>Realized total number of participants</i>		21

Data collection

A balanced interview guide balances the need for natural features of conversation and the need for a focused discussion in a focus group (Krueger & Casey, 2000). An initial interview protocol was designed based on the research questions and two explorative interviews with two ex-employees. The group interview was a semi-structured one hour online chat session based on a set of required questions (for comparison) with opportunities for probing responses (for tailoring to individual respondents). An initial chat procedure was designed based on the technical characteristics of the chat program MSN Messenger and theory of conducting focus groups (Krueger & Casey, 2000) and group-interviews (Saunders et al., 2000). Prior to finalizing the interview protocol, we conducted a pilot chat session with four consultants to assess whether or not the interview questions were understandable and evocative, and to assess the procedure of the chat.

Because of the conclusions of this pilot test, the total number of questions was reduced, the optimal number of participants was set on three participants and the procedure of the chat session was standardized. Ultimately, the final interview protocol included four open questions and several matching questions to probe more in-depth individual information. The interview protocol for the managers chat was derived from the professionals' interview questions³.

Three days before each session, every participant received an email with information on the chat procedure and the structure of the session. As using a chat tool was still an uncommon form of data collection, specific attention was given to technical use of the tool (e.g. information on how to log on to MSN messenger) and the impact of the tool on the interview procedure (e.g. managing the participants' expectations for waiting time).

The eight chat sessions were conducted within a three-week time frame. Besides the advantages of limited time investment of participants and the relatively short time frame of the data collection, another major advantage of using the online method is that the results did not have to be transcript afterwards. The results were immediately transcript during the interview by the participants and interviewer and saved immediately after every session.

Coding procedures

The interview transcripts contained an average of 2,455 words (range: 2,079-2,826 words). To start the analysis a general summary was made of each chat session to allow for general themes to emerge and a first comparison between the focus groups. The raw material of the transcripts was then coded following an inductive approach in the spirit of the grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Saunders et al., 2000). First, an "open coding" strategy was

³ Both interview protocols can be retrieved from the researchers.

used, allowing for deriving meaning from the subjects being studied without an explicit basis in existing theory (Saunders et al., 2000). After this first stage, an “axial coding” strategy was used, allowing for categories and relationships to emerge (Saunders et al., 2000). After deleting non-information, the remaining data was split up in 95 fragments and coded close to the content of the fragment. Next, the fragments were arranged in five main themes that were emerging: a. *What does the post-exit contact consist of?* b. *What are their current feelings towards their ex- organization?* c. *What are they planning to do or doing now, in terms of benefiting their ex-organization?* d. *What happened in the past (during employment and at and/or before exit)?* e. *What is happening in their current employment (employment after exit)?*

Further analysis of the fragments initially categorized in theme b. (What are their feelings towards the ex-organization now?), began to revolve around three main categories. These categories were further broken down into sub-categories. These (sub-) categories and the other results are described in the next paragraph.

RESULTS

In this paragraph, the findings of the coding procedure are presented. Successively, the following results are described: the nature of post-exit contact, (positive & negative) affect and instrumental attachment towards the ex-organization, affects neutralizing over time and benefiting the ex-organization.

Nature of post-exit contact: Business, professional or pleasure

Results reveal three types of post-exit contact: business oriented contact, professional contact, and friendship. Business orientated contact is about approaching the ex-organization as (potential) client or supplier, or run into the ex-organization as a competitor in an acquisition process. Freelancers talk about earning (part of) their income through their contact

with their ex-organization. Professional contact is about contacting the ex-organization for professional support: meeting the ex-organization at professional associations, attending professional meetings and conferences, or consultation with ex-colleagues or ex-managers. Friendships with colleagues continue after exit. These three types of contact, can be, but do not have to be separate. In the following example, the respondent seems to combine friendship with professional support: A respondent states that:

[3.3]⁴.... I notice that I do not talk about work to “other” friends. That is much easier with old-colleague-friends”.

Although the impact of friendships with specific ex-colleagues should not be underestimated in light of the post-exit phenomenon, this aspect will not be the focus in the rest of this study. One reason is of substantive nature: the proposed “post-exit loyalty” based on friendship with a specific former colleague, may be more vulnerable or less durable, seen from the organization’s perspective. When this former colleague leaves the organization, it seems unlikely that their loyalty will “transfer” to the successor of this former colleague or to the rest of the organization. In social identity terms: The collective identity orientation (Brickson, 2000) is less person dependent and therefore seems to be more “resistant” to exit of former colleagues. Another reason is more ethical. In this research, the focus is on aspects that can be influenced by organizations. Although many friendships (even love affairs) start in the workplace, and probably work-related benefits as well as problems could arise from these (that may be of concern to the organization), it is our opinion that this should not be the main concern of work-related organizations. Therefore, there will only be reference to friends in this study in terms of them being potential employees, clients, competitors, etc., for the ex-organization.

⁴ The numbering of the quotes used in this paper refer to the numbering of the focus groups mentioned in Table 1 Realized focus groups . For example: Fragment [3.5] refers to the 5th fragment of the 3rd group.

Positive and negative affects

Further analysis of the items initially categorized in category b. (*What are they feeling now?*) revealed a distinction between positive and negative affects, and a more instrumental form of attachment towards the ex-organization. The positive and negative affects are described in this paragraph, the instrumental attachment in the one thereafter.

In the category post-exit positive affects, nine initial sub-categories were identified (gratefulness, happiness, interest, trust, sympathy, togetherness, equity, pride, respect). In this study, affects towards the ex-organization are viewed as the tendency to experience and express certain emotions and moods towards the ex-organization. Baas et al. (2008) mention several dimensions of emotions. One of these dimensions is the activation level. This refers to the intensity associated to the experience of each emotion. Some emotions are positive and deactivating (e.g. relaxed), whereas others are positive and activating (e.g. happy). Likewise, some emotions are negative and deactivating (e.g. sad), whereas others are negative and activating (e.g. anger). For this study, the more activating emotions seem to be most crucial, in that they may activate people to benefit (or harm) the ex-organization.

In order to create a final list post-exit positive affects, the sub-categories were reviewed on their “activating potential”. Gratefulness, interest, trust, togetherness, pride and happiness were considered most “activating”. Sympathy, equity and respect were considered least “activating”. Happiness was deleted from the final list. This sub-category did not seem distinctive enough. Happiness refers to a more general type of positive feelings. The following table (Table 2) gives an overview of the final list of emerged categories, their definitions, the frequency (number of fragments and percentage of the total amount of affect fragments), and sample quotes.

Table 2 Definitions & sample quotes post-exit positive affects

Emerged categories	Definition	Freq. (%)	<i>Sample quotes positive affects</i>
Gratefulness ex-org	Feeling of being well disposed towards the ex-organization because of enjoyed privileges.	16 (22.5)	[5.11]... Yes, that does play a role in my situation. I have worked for a long time with the ex-organization, I have experienced a lot, done a lot, and I thank them for that. I now choose to work somewhere else, but that does not change the feeling. <i>What are those feelings exactly?</i> Appreciating the chances I had, to do things and the freedom in which I could do this. The pleasure I had experienced, in doing it.
Interest ex-org	Feeling of interest towards the ex-organization. Interest means here: wanting to be posted/updated on the ex-organization and wanting to give attention to and discover more about the ex-organization.	6 (8.5)	[3.17]....if the ex-organization is presented one way or another in professional journals, it attracts my attention extra.
Trust ex-org	Feeling of belief in the trustworthiness of the ex-organization. Trustworthiness means here: that the ex-organization can be trusted, so that one can rely on it.	5 (7.0)	[1.10].I always had a deep-rooted trust in the expertise of my advisor colleagues. For me, the feelings towards my ex-employer returned when they (on my recommendation) came for a small job. Fortunately, they did this as good as it used to be and I than internally promoted them further.
Togetherness ex-org	Feeling of being bonded with the ex-organization in friendship and cordial relationship.	27 (38,0)	[3.8] I recognize the warm business-like contact. Do have the feeling of still being joined. I also think it is an inspiring contact..... The ex-organization is in my heart.
Pride ex-org	Feeling of accomplishing something big at the ex-organization and/or belonging to something big and/or beautiful, this represents the ex-organization.	5 (7.0)	[5.12] I do feel emotionally involved with this ex-organization; I see that there is a lot of potential in applying the [name of specific program of the ex-organization] – body of ideas in the current market.... I feel that I can still have an important contribution to the ex-organization. <i>What is exactly the feeling that you have?</i> ... That I can be a contribution and the ex-organization can be a contribution for me; although it is more from a distance.

In the category, post-exit negative affects, six sub-categories of affects were initially identified (unease, anger, disappointment, regret, distrust, shame). Consistent with the procedure of post-exit positive affects, the sub-categories were reviewed on their “activating potential”. Considered most “activating” were unease, anger, disappointment, distrust and shame. Considered least “activating” was regret. Unease was deleted from the final list as this referred to a more general type of negative affects, consistent with the reasoning regarding happiness in the list of positive affects. The following table (Table 3) gives an overview of the emerged categories, their definitions, the frequency (number of fragments and percentage of

the total amount of affect fragments), and sample quotes. The deleted sub-categories of both negative and positive affects, were part of the group with the lowest frequencies of fragments in the data.

Table 3 Definition & sample quotes negative affects

Emergед categories	Definition	Freq. (%)	<i>Sample quotes negative affects</i>
Anger ex-org	Feeling of being in an unpleasant mood, for which (it is shown that) one blames the ex-organization.	11 (45.8)	[4.12] In the beginning, I was exhausted and angry. Now the organization is just like any other organization for me..... When I joined the ex-organization, it was still a pioneering company. We had to invent everything and this often felt not good. How can you ask so much money for something that is quite experimental for us? I missed senior colleagues with much experience to learn from and to lean on. At the same time money had to be brought in and this double pressure was sometimes just too high.
Disappoint-ment ex-org	Feeling of being deceived in once expectations by the ex-organization.	7 (29.1)	[1.9.3] After my exit, the company has developed itself into directions that are not my cup of tea. Even worse, I disagree.... <i>What does it mean to you that the organization developed in a different direction?</i> I was director (in employment) there. I developed policy, strategy myself and worked on it... Now it is different, this is sometimes painful to see (feeling of: too bad)
Distrust ex-org	Feeling of absence of trustworthiness of the ex-organization. Absence of trustworthiness means here: that the ex-organization cannot be trusted, so that one cannot rely on it.	2 (8.3)	[1.10] At first, I felt slightly negative. There were quality issues when I left and did not dare to recommend them to my new employer immediately.
Shame ex-org	Feeling of being embarrassed and/or uncomfortable about the connection/ association with the ex-organization.	1 (4.1)	[1.9.2] Affect towards organization: neutral to negative. Do not feel attached on aspects; even do not want to be associated with it.

Affects develop over time

Data reveal that affects develop over time. There seems to be a neutralizing effect over time: positive affects getting less positive; negative affects getting less negative. Although the data show consistency in this neutralizing effect, results do reveal variance in the level of emotions involved in this process. Ex-employees report it being a quite normal, “not exceptional” process, which happens when you adopt another culture [4.10], showing no sign of intensive emotions. Moving on, getting a new “business perspective” makes you look back feeling more nuanced to your ex-organization [4.7]. Others talk about a more intense, more

emotional process; they talk about getting “mentally” used to the new different relationship [5.6], the need for “kicking the habit”[4.19] and even “being mad at herself” [4.8] The following sample quotes illustrate this more emotional process:

[4.19].....The working method of the company has been in my genes immensely, nearly indoctrination. When I was gone and joined another company, I really had to kick the habit. I did not work there a long time, because I did not fit into that new culture. I was still to fanatic, although they were very positive on my expertise.

How do you explain this?

Just..... Had to kick the habit, was not totally myself... Yes, how they do that, I really do not know. I mean: that you start to work so hard there, do you utmost best, and become so good.

Also the results from the managers group show this neutralizing effect. One manager explained that she more than once experienced that junior ex-employees who left the company reported back to her that in hindsight: “things were not that bad”[7.15]. These junior employees had felt that way when they just left their first job at this organization. The other manager had similar experiences with ex-employees. He stated that “with a new frame of reference (working at other employers)”, they often concluded that the ex-organization was a special company [7.14].

Instrumental attachment

Results show that ex-employees keep good relations with their ex-employer for their own personal benefit. Respondents refer to having no obligations in the new relationship with the employer and foremost being able to make their own decisions based on their own conditions [3.7]. With instrumental attachment, there is some reference of attachment towards the ex-organization but mainly based on personal economic needs, like the need for (continuity in) income [8.4], and position or status in the market [2.6][2.12]. The contact with the ex-employer is described as being more strategically [5.7].

The following sample quote illustrates this effect:

[3.7] It feels like an equal contact. If I say no, there is nothing attached. Concrete example: In an acquisition process, I had no click with the client. I did not accept the assignment. With good argumentation, this was accepted and even respected. This does not come back in (for example) an assessment interview.....
.....I am freelancer under my own conditions. Of course, I am looking for a match and therefore have the necessary flexibility. However, I decide on my own boundaries and not the organization or in consultation with the organization....

Benefiting the ex-organization

Results show that ex-employees benefit the ex-organization in different ways: it varies from willingness to promote the ex-organization to their business and professional relations [4.5] [4.11], to favour them over other organizations [6.16] and grant them business on regular basis [1.13]. The degree in activeness of the ex-employees varies; some talk about “keeping the ex-organization in the back of their mind” [4.5], which refers to a more passive way of benefiting the ex-organization, while others take an active role in this process by “bringing the knowhow of the ex-organization to the attention of others on a regular basis” [1.13].

In addition, there seems to be a difference in intention to benefit and actually benefiting the ex-organization: respondents report on what they would do if there would be an opportunity [4.5], and on what they actually do or did (e.g. favouring the ex-organization by not raising their hourly rate [6.16]).

The results also reveal intentions towards the ex-organization that could be harmful, or at least could be seen as non-beneficial. Three respondents talked about not wanting to be involved or benefit the ex-organization in anyway. These three respondents all expressed strong negative affects towards the ex-organization and expressed no or very limited positive affects and instrumental attachment. The following fragment illustrates this non-beneficial behaviour.

[1.12]... I do not keep a relationship with my ex-employer (except from a few colleagues), I do feel somewhat emotionally involved, but more from a negative side. If I talk about my ex-organization with others, I stay neutral or tell honestly were I disagree with my ex-organization... I do not recommend the ex-organization to my own network, even if the issues would be suitable for what they do now...

The results regarding the other ex-employees, who were willing (in different degrees) to benefit the ex-organization, show more variation. Some of the ex-employees showed mainly positive affects, others showed also some instrumental attachment and negative affects: they have more “mixed feelings”. The following fragment illustrates these “mixed feelings”.

[4.15] ... I have transferred to non-profit and there I ended up in a warm bath. However, I did not want to have missed my ex-organization. It does feel like grateful...

For what exactly are you grateful?

...For the things I have learned, in skills and work attitude. Recently my ex-boss said: we have also made good money on you, and that felt partly as recognition, but partly as being “used”.

Although findings show variation, the above findings indicate a possible relation between the intensity of the affects and the willingness of people to benefit the ex-organization. More (quantitative) research is necessary to see whether this relation is significant.

For many researchers on loyalty, personal sacrifice is an essential element of loyalty within the organizational context. Results suggest that this may not be applicable for the post-exit situation. Some respondents do show willingness to sacrifice, for example accepting a lower hourly rate [6.16] or taking risk by recommending the ex-organization to their new working environment. Even in this case though, ex-employees still indicate the importance of mutual benefit and their striving for win-win situations. This seems especially important when an ex-employee continues his/her career in the same business (competing) [8.16] [5.4]. If the relationship is out of balance, ex-employees want that situation to be improved [5.4]:

[8.16] I have experienced that we do grant each other a proper amount and regularly scratches each other’s backs. This mutuality is good. For example, I give a lead for an assignment that I cannot execute myself and I get assignments for them to execute myself....

[5.4] The ex-organization is a partner, with a lot of one-way traffic, the ex-organization determines.... The ex-organization is leading in what is being asked to be done..... *Moreover, what does that mean to you?*

That I am going to take the initiative to come up with ideas and projects so that the cooperation is more in balance.

What is your reason for doing this?

That I want to cooperate with organizations that really want to innovate together.

The above sample quotes also reveal a distinction, which were found in more interview results. There seems to be a difference in the essence of this “mutuality”. There is

mutual benefit, in economical terms: money and jobs or assignments [8.16], which is probably more related to instrumental attachment. There is also mutual benefit on a more emotional level: “being equal partners” [5.9], which is probably related to positive affects. This result is in line with earlier results that (positive) affects are distinct from a more instrumental form of attachment. To illustrate this partnership:

[5.6]when I just left, I really wanted to come loose, to put it very crudely: loose from the “power” of the employer. Doing my own things. In my opinion, this just takes time. This does improve, after a while not having worked as an employee-employer relationship, this gets much better. It feels more equal in the partnership. We were able to discuss this in all openness.

The managers’ results are consistent with this distinction. They also talked about mutual relationships with ex-employees; not only in terms of money, but also in terms of “inspiration, personal growth, or satisfaction, or just because the cooperation or contact is fun”[7.8]. This “mutuality” not only refers to the post-exit relationship, it also seems to play a role in the ex-employee evaluating his/her employment with the ex-employer. To illustrate this:

[5.10] ... ex-employee’s are the best ambassadors of an organization, when the organization really invested in their employees..... This ex-organization has to deal with the image that employees when they leave are substantial critical on how much they have been put to work versus the investment that came back from the employer.

Although there may be numerous other factors involved in the degree to which one would want to benefit the ex-organization, consistent with the literature review in this article, identification and tenure seem to reside among them. The respondent in the following fragment explains how she benefits her two ex-organizations differently. She grants one ex-organization access to potential employees, but for the other ex-organization, she is willing to go further; she grants them concrete business deals. She explains being in a competitive position with both ex-organizations. However, because she identifies more with one ex-organization, she is willing to grant this ex-organization more:

[8.15] I regularly recommend educationalists to this (first) ex-organization. However, no potential clients, because we are too much of competitors of each other, and I feel more loyalty towards my second ex-organization. Assignments that I cannot do myself go to this ex-organization (second) and not to the first ex-organization..... *Why this difference?* Because I founded this company myself, and worked there for more than 10 years...

DISCUSSION

Although post-exit loyalty was identified as an important phenomenon (Alvesson, 2002), the topic has received little systematic scholarly attention. Our findings show that there is still substantial activity in the relationship between ex-employee and ex-organization. The three types of post-exit contact were business oriented contact, professional contact, and friendship. Post-exit contact can also be a combination of the three.

A major focus of this study was exploring what the affects are of ex-employees towards their ex-organization as we proposed affects play a major role in the post-exit loyalty concept. The findings show that ex-employees still have a wide pallet of affects towards the ex-organization. What the ex-employees feelings towards the ex-organization are, is complex: ex-employees can even have “mixed feelings”, e.g. being grateful in some way and disappointed in another way.

The variety of affects can be categorized in three types: positive affects (e.g. gratefulness, togetherness), negative affects (e.g. anger, distrust) and a more instrumental form of attachment towards the ex-organization. The main difference between positive affects and instrumental attachment is that although there is some reference of attachment towards the ex-organization, instrumental attachment is mainly based on personal economic needs, like the need for (continuity in) income, position or status in the market. There are no (strong) emotions involved.

The affects differ in their “activation level”. This refers to the intensity associated to the experience of each emotion. The more activating affects (e.g. gratefulness, anger) seem to be more important in terms of post-exit loyalty than the less activating affects (e.g. sympathy, regret). Affects also seem to neutralize over time; strong positive as well as negative affects decline overtime.

The results show ex-employees can benefit ex-organizations in different ways, for example promoting to others, sharing ideas, introducing them to others, doing them a favour and granting them business and interesting jobs. The degree in which the ex-employee takes on an active role varies; some are very active, while others have a more passive way of benefiting the ex-organization. The results also reveal intentions towards the ex-organization that could be harmful, or at the very least can be seen as non-beneficial.

This study offers some evidence that there is a relationship between affects and benefiting the ex-organization. Respondents who expressed that they were not willing to benefit the ex-organization in anyway, all express strong negative affects towards the ex-organization and express no or very limited positive affects and instrumental attachment. However, the picture of positive affects and instrumental attachment is less clear. More (quantitative) research is necessary to see whether these relations are significantly there.

For the post-exit situation, benefiting from a “mutual perspective” seems to be most appropriate and enduring within the knowledge intensive industry. In other words, not only the ex-organization should benefit, but also the ex-employee.

Limitations and future research

This study is not without limitations. First, the sample for the qualitative study was not a random sample of consultants. This was not possible, due to access problems within a limited timeframe. Although the last chat session, did not bring many additional categories of affects, that had not been identified before, it is not possible to rule out that any more post-exit affects exist. For future researchers it is therefore important to conduct more qualitative studies, to check whether new categories emerge that would add more depth to the constructs.

The second limitation is the external validity. For this study, it was our goal to explore post-exit loyalty within the context of Dutch consultancy organizations. However, to increase

external validity of the constructs, future researchers are also encouraged to conduct research in other types of knowledge intensive companies and/or in other countries.

Another limitation of this study is that this study only focuses on the affects towards the ex-organization, as a collective. Both Brewer & Gardner (1996) and Brickson (2000; 2007) proposed that the self concept is multifaceted, consisting of three fundamental loci of self-definition: the self as an individual (personal), as an interpersonal being (relational), and as a group member (collective) (Brickson, 2000). For future studies, it may be important to distinguish identifying with this organization as a whole (“being a good group member”) or with (a few of) their former colleague(s) (“being a good colleague or co-worker”). This distinction seems especially important for the post-exit situation for two reasons. The first reason is that loyalty that is only directed toward the former colleague, might be more vulnerable (from the organization’s perspective) to exit of this former colleague as it seems to be less likely that their loyalty will “transfer” to the successor of this former colleague. The second reason has to do with the context of this study situated in Dutch medium-sized⁵ (knowledge intensive) consultancy organizations. Alvesson (2000) argues that larger and smaller companies differ in their successful “means” of managing loyalty. As mentioned before, Alvesson (2000) identified a distinctive organizational identity driven by organizational symbolism as a successful way of managing loyalty in larger companies. Smaller companies might have difficulty in successfully developing rhetoric about their distinctiveness or excellence, but may instead have strong rhetoric about interpersonal bonds.

⁵ Medium-sized within the Dutch context: 30 – 50 consultants.

Contributions and Implications

Despite its limitations, this study contributes to the organizational literature and the employee loyalty study in at least four ways. First, this post-exit perspective adds to the employee loyalty study by providing more evidence that employee loyalty (within the organizational context) indeed is more than just the continuation of employment (Alvesson, 2002). Even beyond employment, ex-employees can still have strong positive affects towards their ex-organizations.

Second, post-exit loyalty, just like employee loyalty defined by Van Vugt and Hart (2004), should be regarded as a multidimensional construct. Many authors already identified the emotional aspect of employee loyalty. This post-exit study provides further evidence for the central role of affects in the loyalty construct.

For Zdaniuk & Levine (2001) the lack of concern for personal welfare is a necessary part of loyalty. It is here where this post-exit loyalty deviates from employee loyalty. Although there was some indication of personal sacrifice for the benefit of the ex-organization, generally this did not apply. A mutual benefit (partnership) approach, on a more emotional level, seems more appropriate. Identification processes may offer a theoretical explanation for the ex-employees' need for this mutuality. Because people can belong to multiple groups or collectives, employees can form multiple social identities, one or more of which might be more prominent at any given time (e.g. Brewer & Gardner, 1996; Meyer et al., 2006). It seems plausible that when an employee "trades" an organization for another working environment, the identification process in his or her new organization (or own business) causes the ex-employees need for balancing the benefits in the long run. More research is necessary to examine the relationships between (multiple) identities and post-exit (multiple) loyalties.

This study also has practical implications. First, it is important for management of knowledge intensive companies to realize that their ex-employees still have many affects towards their ex-organizations. Management should be aware that positive affects are distinct from instrumental attachment. So even when ex-employees, like freelancers, are economically attached to the organization, it may be worthwhile to find out how they feel about their ex-organizations. Being aware of affects of ex-employees is not only important for the inter-organizational perspective, but also for the organizational perspective. Having many ex-employees with negative affects, may also have negative impact on the current workforce because of the negative image it creates.

Management should take into account that ex-employees strive for mutual benefiting relationships. Moreover, this study provides some evidence that affects neutralize over time. This suggests that positive affects need to be “maintained” in order to stay strong. Several ex-employees in this study reported that they enjoy attending professional meetings at their ex-organizations. This type of alumni activities that appeal to social and emotional aspects (Alvesson, 2002) may be a fruitful way to create a context for post-exit positive affects to last, and to remain the enduring value of ex-employees to knowledge intensive organizations.

Conclusion

In this increasing knowledge intensive economy, organizations depend more and more on their inter-organizational networks. This study sheds light in an underexposed field of the post-exit relationship of the ex-employees and their ex-organizations. We started this study with this interesting idea of ex-employees becoming “ambassadors” for their former organizations. Did we really find post-exit loyalty? In our opinion, this remains to be seen. What we did find were positive affects and people benefiting the ex-organizations. By identifying these, we hope to spur study of post-exit loyalty, its antecedents and consequences.

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