

Monetary incentives, motivational orientation and affective commitment in contact centers. A multilevel mediation model ¹

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Abstract

High quality contact and customer relationships are key services for all types of firms. To achieve this high quality performance standard, companies need highly motivated and committed employees, and human resources managers are responsible for designing and implementing practices capable of satisfying both economic exchanges and social exchanges in employee-organization relationships. The aim of this study is to analyze

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the relationships between monetary incentive expectation and affective commitment, in addition to the mediating role of motivation orientation in this relationship, in contact center employees. In particular, based on the social exchange theory (Blau, 1964), social exchange Cropanzano and Mitchell's (2005) model, and the self-determination theory (Deci et al., 2017), our study adopts a multilevel perspective to examine these relationships in a sample of 2367 contact center employees from 297 teams (3 or more participants). The results showed that the level of performance-contingent rewards (team-level) guides the team's autonomous motivation (team-level), which, in turn, fosters employees' affective commitment (individual-level). The results have practical implications for human resource managers and for interventions aimed to promote contact center employees' affective commitment, taking performance-contingent rewards into account.

Keywords: Affective commitment, Monetary incentives, Motivation, Contact centers, Social exchange

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Introduction

The work of contact centers and electronic services has continued to increase in volume and sophistication in the last two decades and constitutes a core service in customer relationships for all types of businesses and companies. Given the high emotional demands usually required by this type of work, it would be advisable for workers to have a positive attitude, adequate motivation and high commitment to the job and organization (Totterdell & Holman, 2003). However, working conditions in contact centers have often been associated with low employee wellbeing, poor motivation, negative work attitudes and turnover intentions (e.g., De Cuyper et al., 2014; Grebner et al., 2003; Holman, 2002). Given this discrepancy between desired employee attitudes and behaviors and actual work outcomes, contact centers' human resources managers try to improve employee motivation through the enhancement of affective factors, such as identification (Wegge et al, 2006) and, particularly, commitment to the organization (Deery & Kinnie, 2002; Kinnie et al., 2000).

Affective commitment refers to the involvement, emotional attachment to and identification with the organization developed by the employee (Meyer & Allen, 1984), and reflects the core essence of organizational commitment (Mercurio, 2015). Prior research has shown that affective organizational commitment has significant positive correlates for valuable work outcomes, both at organizational and individual levels.

Meta-analytic results (Cooper-Hakim & Viswesvaran, 2005; Meyer et al., 2002) have found that affective commitment has robust correlations with organization-relevant outcomes (negative with withdrawal cognition and turnover, and positive with attendance, work performance, and organizational citizenship behavior) and employee-relevant outcomes (negative with stress and work – family conflict and positive with job satisfaction).

As far as commitment antecedents in contact centers' employees is concerned, prior research has analyzed the role of working conditions, showing that concentration demands, job control and job complexity/variety are positively related to affective commitment (Grebner et al., 2003), whereas lack of task complexity is related to low organizational commitment (Baumgartner et al., 2002). Research has also found (McGuire & McLaren, 2009) a positive relationship, mediated by employee wellbeing, between the contact center's physical environment and employee commitment, and between being valued in the current contact center position and organizational commitment (Biggs & Swailes, 2006). However, to our knowledge, no study has analyzed the potential role of performance-contingent rewards in generating employees' affective commitment to date.

Resources exchanged in a relationship may be socio-emotional (e.g., support, care, or information) and monetary (Foa & Foa, 1980), and the organization can make investments of both resources to motivate its employees in order to achieve valuable work outcomes. The role played by economic incentives as motivators of behavior at work is well known in the literature (Cerasoli et al., 2014). When employees perceive that their organization is willing to support and reward them monetarily for their high

performance, they may reciprocate by increasing their organizational attachment (Yip et al., 2018), and consequently strengthening their emotional bond and their affective commitment (Aubé et al., 2007). Thus, human resource management (HRM) policies and practices that contribute to the perception of interest and support, such as a monetary incentive expectation, may activate motivational mediating mechanisms in employees that contribute to the development of affective commitment (Meyer et al., 2002). Based on these grounds and prior partial data, this study seeks to analyze the relationships between monetary incentive expectation and affective commitment, in addition to the mediating role of motivation orientation in this relationship, in contact center employees. Going a step further, this study adopts a multilevel perspective. Based on the social exchange theory (Blau, 1964) and the self-determination theory (Deci et al., 2017), this study further advances that the level of performance-contingent rewards (team-level) guides the team's autonomous motivation (team-level), which, in turn, fosters employees' affective commitment (individual-level).

Thus, this paper makes several distinct contributions. First, despite the relevance of a socio-emotional relationship to explain employees' affective commitment, the effect of economic rewards on employees' work attitudes and behaviors has not yet proven to be conclusive (Camerer & Hogarth, 1999; Kuvaas et al., 2017; San Martín, 2008). Based on Cropanzano and Mitchell's (2005) model, which underlines the need to include the type of relationship and the type of transaction in order to characterize a social exchange, this study hypothesizes that an exchange characterized by an economic transaction – the level of performance-contingent rewards – may contribute to a social relationship, and is positively related to employees' affective commitment. Second, in line with the self-determination theory, which states that positive employees' outcomes

may be explained by autonomous motivation (Gagné & Deci, 2005), the present study contributes to existing research on practices of rewards and employees' attitudes, based on the idea that this extrinsic reward contributes to employees' emotional liaison with the organization (i.e. affective commitment), and given its importance, it also contributes to autonomous motivation (Deci et al., 2017). It is also the aim of this study to draw practical conclusions that may help human resource managers understand how they can intervene to promote contact center employees' affective commitment, taking performance-contingent rewards into account.

Theoretical background and hypotheses

Types of relationships and transactions and monetary incentives as antecedents of affective commitment

Following the aforementioned general distinction regarding the resources exchanged in social relationships (Foa & Foa, 1980), in the literature on employee-organization relationships, social (or relational orientation) and economic (or transactional orientation) exchanges have also been differentiated. Basically, the social exchange theory (Blau, 1964) and the inducements-contributions model (March & Simon, 1958) have served as the theoretical backdrop for understanding the employee and employer's perspectives regarding the labor exchange (Coyle-Shapiro & Shore, 2007). For instance, both organizational support theory and psychological contract theory have proven that exchanges between employees and their organizations usually include a combination variable of both components (Shore et al., 2006). Thus, if the organization supports the employees and fulfills their contractual obligations (both explicit and implicit), then the employees respond reciprocally, showing adequate in-role and extra-role performance

and developing trust, affective commitment and the intention to remain in the organization. In sum, socio-emotional, economic and more tangible features shape the employment relationship (Shore et al., 2006).

An accurate understanding of the effect of financial incentives on human performance is key to HRM. Behavioral economists and psychologists have discussed for years the actual effect size of the economic incentive on human motivation, and prior research has shown that results are mixed and inconclusive. On the one hand, a review of experimental studies (mainly economic; Camerer & Hogarth, 1999) found that incentives improve performance in certain easy tasks that are effort-responsive, like judgment, prediction, problem-solving, or clerical tasks; whereas incentives sometimes harm performance when tasks or problems are too difficult or non-intuitive, like auctions or risky choices. On the other hand, a review of (mainly psychological) studies indicated that monetary incentives are positively associated with performance quantity, but not with performance quality (Jenkins et al., 1998). In addition, monetary incentives can have a positive effect on work performance in the short run, but not in the long-term. And large and small incentives can have paradoxical effects: while large incentives increase performance, can also decrease it; and small incentives can even decrease performance compared to unrewarded work behaviors (Ariely et al., 2009; Camerer & Hogarth, 1999; Strang et al., 2016). Since tasks in contact centers are being redefined to become more complex and contingent on customer relations, inquiring into the motivational effects of economic incentives is crucial for HRM.

Regarding the effect of financial incentives on team performance, results show that team-based incentives increase their performance mainly in difficult tasks (Garbers & Konradt, 2014; Knight et al., 2001), although equitably distributed rewards resulting

in higher team performance than equally distributed rewards (Garbers & Konradt, 2014). And meta-analytical data also showed (Condly et al., 2003) that team-based incentives had a significantly greater effect on job performance (a 48 percent increase) compared to individually based incentives (a 19 percent increase).

Research on the link between financial rewards and work attitudes has found some basis for the relationship between team-based incentives and organizational commitment, although this relationship is mediated by perceived organizational support (Park & Kim, 2013). Although the mediating role of goal commitment has been proposed in the relationship between economic incentives and performance, both at the individual level (Wright & Kacmar, 1995), and at the team level (Guthrie & Hollensbe, 2004), the results have been inconclusive. Hence, it is necessary to deepen the relationships between team-based monetary incentives, motivation and commitment, as proposed in our study based on the social exchange theory.

Prior research has found strong theoretical and empirical support for the relevant role of social exchange mechanisms in the development of employee organizational affective commitment (e.g., Alcover et al., 2012; Shore et al., 2009; Tekleab, & Chiaburu, 2011), whereas economic exchange has been found to be in general negatively related to affective commitment (e.g., Alcover et al., 2012; Gakovic & Tetrick, 2003; Shore et al., 2006, 2009). Furthermore, there is evidence of mixed relational and economic antecedents of affective organizational commitment (San Martín, 2008). However, these studies have possibly not taken into account the differentiation proposed by Cropanzano and Mitchell (2005) between the type of relationship and the type of transaction in the characterization of social exchanges. Their model posits that the relationship may be a match (i.e., social transaction in a

social relationship, or economic transaction in an economic relationship) or mismatch (economic transaction in a social relationship, or social transaction in an economic relationship) (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). While work design in contact centers is usually associated with individualized and routine work (Grebner et al., 2003; Holman, 2002), even in a context where co-workers' relationships are often hindered by management control (van den Broek et al., 2004), some contact center companies implement certain sophisticated and costly human resource practices to build a skilled workforce and cultivate employees' commitment to the organization (e.g., Batt, 1999; Mulholland, 2002) in order to provide more complex services to customers and to maximize service quality and effectiveness (Chicu et al., 2019). This means that not all contact centers necessarily follow the "economic transaction in an economic relationship" rule, and therefore other types of exchanges between employees and their employers may be established.

Contact center managerial strategies may use performance – related pay as a HRM practice, granting more involvement and discretionary work effort among employees (Batt, 2002; Castanheira & Chambel, 2010; Holman, 2005). Based on task complexity and the importance of employees' behaviors to determine customer services and satisfaction, organizations define different teams whose members obtain different levels of rewards based on performance. Thus, the objective is not only to increase employee job satisfaction, but also to improve performance, quality of service and customer satisfaction, which in turn is rewarded by an economic incentive. This mismatch exchange, characterized by an economic transaction in a social relationship, may be found in more complex contact center services. However, as referred to by Cropanzano and Mitchell (2005), this situation can potentially imply benefits and risks

for the parties. On the one hand, a social exchange relationship has the advantage of generating higher trust and a probable psychological safety climate, so the risks of unfulfilling or producing poor quality work are less likely in a context that promotes involvement. However, on the other hand, if the economic obligations are unfulfilled, even when the employee has performed well, this may be perceived as a betrayal, and the negative emotional reaction may be highly intense, irreversibly damaging the relationship, such as when a psychological contract violation occurs (Chambel & Fortuna, 2015). Consequently, the aim of this paper is to explore whether a socio-emotional outcome (affective commitment) is developed when an economic transaction (monetary reward) is introduced. In other words, it seeks to understand whether a mismatch situation (economic transaction in a social relationship) in a contact center work context can facilitate the achievement of positive outcomes for both employees and employers. Based on these assumptions this paper proposes the following hypothesis:

H1. The team level of performance-contingent rewards is positively related to the affective commitment of its members.

Mediating role of autonomous and controlled motivation

The motivational theory of self-determination (Deci et al. 2017; Deci & Ryan, 1985, 2000) is based on the distinction between extrinsic and intrinsic motivation, or controlled motivation and autonomous motivation. The self-determination theory (SDT) establishes the motivational, self-regulatory, and perceived locus of control bases of intentional behaviors that vary in the degree to which they are initiated and regulated (i.e., are self-determined), expressed on a self-determination continuum (Deci & Ryan, 1985). This means that "goal-directed

activities can differ in the extent to which they are autonomous or self-determined—that is, in the extent to which they are enacted with a full sense of volition and choice. Intrinsic motivation and well-internalized extrinsic motivation are the bases for autonomous or self-determined behavior" (Deci & Ryan, 2000, p. 237). A central proposition of the SDT establishes that intrinsic motivation is invariantly self-determined, whereas extrinsic motivation may vary in the degree to which it is autonomous versus controlled (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Gagné & Deci, 2005). Thus, the extrinsic motivation continuum begins with "external regulation", a motivation controlled by contingencies of rewards and punishment; continues with "introjected regulation", a moderately controlled motivation that implies ego-involvement and self-worth, contingent on performance; followed by "identified regulation", a moderately autonomous motivation driven by the importance of goals, values and regulations; and ends with "integrated regulation", an autonomous motivation driven by the coherence among goals, values and regulations (Gagné & Deci, 2005).

Prior research has analyzed the combination of intrinsic and identified self-regulation motivation – autonomous motivation (e.g., Burton et al., 2006), suggesting that both interact complementarily to encourage vitality, personal worth, growth and adaptation (Deci & Ryan, 2000). This double mechanism works so that intrinsic self-regulation orients the person towards the task, as they finds interest and enjoyment in it, leading to absorption and energizing emotions, while identification guides the person to focus on the long-term importance of the current tasks and contributes to persistence in effort, as the activity is congruent with his/her personal goals and identity (Burton et al., 2006; Gagné & Deci,

2005). In sum, "possessing high levels of both intrinsic motivation and identification would seem to allow one the flexibility to adapt to a wide array of situations" (Burton et al., 2006, p. 751).

If the contact center employees who work in teams identify with the goals of a quality performance in achieving customer satisfaction, their identified motivation will be higher, and in turn, this motivation will tend to boost interest and enjoyment in the task itself, that is, their intrinsic motivation. Prior studies have shown that the extent to which people experience job involvement and identify with their task goals is predictive of their goal commitment and outcomes, even in the presence of difficulties (Hollenbeck & Klein, 1987; Lydon & Zanna, 1990), whereas intrinsic motivation and autonomy involve working with a sense of personal volition and having the experience of choice in initiating and regulating one's task activities (Deci et al., 1989; Gagné & Deci, 2005). In sum, on the one hand, the incentive of a monetary reward may act as an extrinsic reward that contributes to an extrinsic motivation that enhances identification and a moderately autonomous motivation. However, on the other hand, due to the fact that in order to obtain this monetary reward it is necessary to achieve good performance in more complex tasks, the development of intrinsic/autonomous motivation is also facilitated. In fact, as assumed by the self-determination theory, the effect of economic rewards on autonomous motivation depends on their functional significance (Deci et al., 2017). Economic rewards with levels that are dependent on the complexity of the tasks involved suggest that in order to attain high rewards, teams need members with more skills and competences to perform a high quality customer service. Thus, this practice may satisfy the basic

psychological need for competence and enhance the team's autonomous motivation. Moreover, this practice may also promote a perception of justice as the level of performance-contingent rewards has a positive and direct relationship with the complexity of the task, and teams with such tasks that involve more effort and demands have the opportunity to receive higher rewards than a team with lower efforts and demands. Hence, intrinsic and identified motivations may act as mediators between the team's level of performance-contingent rewards and work outcomes, in this case, affective organizational commitment.

Prior research (Gagné & Koestner, 2002) has found that organizational commitment -indexed by identification and internalization, in line with O'Reilly and Chatman's (1986) model- correlates strongly with intrinsic motivation and identified regulation, and to a lesser extent, significantly with introjected regulation (Gagné & Koestner, 2002). These results have been confirmed in subsequent studies (Fernet et al., 2012; Gagné et al., 2004), pointing to affective commitment -measured using Allen and Meyer's (1996) measure- being facilitated by employees' autonomous or intrinsic motivation. Furthermore, research on the motivational basis of affective organizational commitment has found that intrinsic motivation is a partial mediator of the relationship between work context variables (such as autonomy, participation and fairness) and affective organizational commitment (Eby et al., 1999). However, to our knowledge, no study has been conducted to date on how the aforementioned SDT motivational orientations can mediate the relationship between monetary rewards (a work context antecedent) and affective commitment. In addition, meta-analytic results (Cerasoli et al., 2014) shown that extrinsic incentives can influence the predictive validity of

intrinsic motivation related to performance, which allows concluding that extrinsic incentives and intrinsic motivation are not necessarily antagonistic, and rather its joint impact can be critical to work performance (Cerasoli et al., 2014). Based on both these assumptions and prior data, this paper proposes the following hypothesis:

H2. The team's autonomous intrinsic (H2a) and identified (H2b) motivation mediates the relationship between the team's level of performance-contingent rewards and the affective commitment of its members.

Figure 1 represents the conceptual model and research hypotheses.

Accepted version

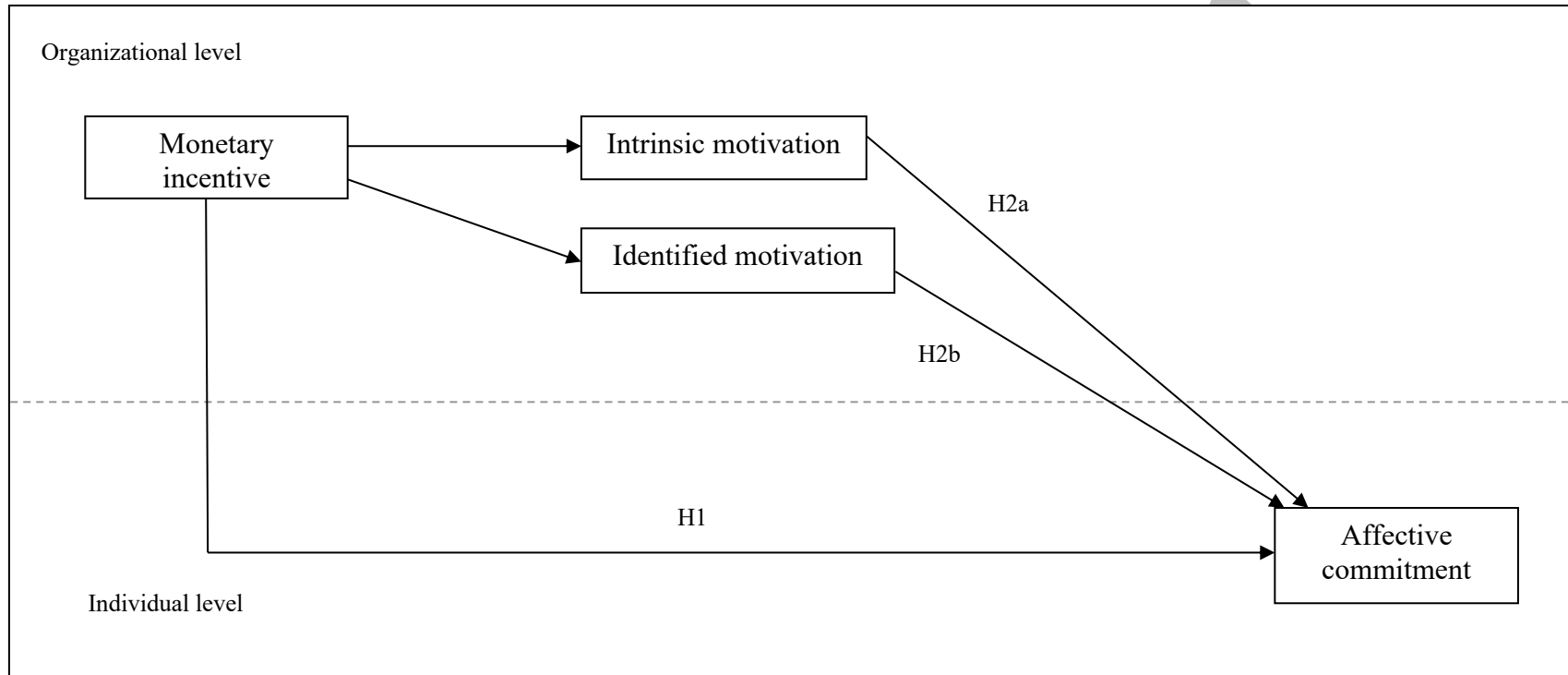


Figure 1. Conceptual model incorporating the research hypotheses.

Material and methods

Participants and Procedure

The data used in this paper were gathered from a contact center outsourcing company in Portugal. The Human Resources Manager was contacted by the researchers and asked for his collaboration in the study. After consent was obtained, the HR department sent an email to its employees which included information on the study and a link for employees to access and fill out the questionnaire on an online survey platform (Survey Monkey). Data were gathered from two sources: employees and employers (the HR manager of the company, as the most appropriate source of the team level of performance-contingent rewards). Employee and employer data from each team were matched based on a code. Participation was voluntary. Respondents' anonymity and confidentiality of data were guaranteed.

Data from 3159 employees (72% of all company employees) from 922 teams were obtained. However, whenever there were fewer than 3 employees per team, these data were eliminated. The sample consisted of 2367 employees from 297 teams (3 or more participants). The number of surveyed employees per team ranged from 3 to 48 (mean= 14.5; SD = 8.63). Participants consisted of 770 (32.5%) males and 1597 (67.5%) females, with a mean age of 33.36 years (SD= 8.66), of whom 1925 (83.5%) were full time and 442 were part time (18.7%) employees, reflecting the general demographic gender, age trend and working hours in this company.

Measures

Level 2 (Team). *The team level of performance-contingent reward.* The Human Resources Manager established the following as the team level of performance-contingent reward: 1 = 0 to 100€; 2 = 101 to 200€; 3 = 201 to 300 €; 4 = over 300€.

Level 2 (Team). Motivation. Work motivation was assessed by a Portuguese adapted version of the Motivation at Work Scale (MAWS; Gagné et al., 2010), that had previously been used in another Portuguese study (Chambel et al., 2015). Items reflecting two types of motivation identified by Deci and Ryan (1985) were used: 4 Intrinsic Motivation items (e.g., “Because I enjoy being in a contact center very much.”); 4 Identified Regulation items (e.g., “Because being in a contact center fulfills my career plans.”), Participants were asked to consider all statements and to indicate the extent to which they corresponded to one of the reasons for why they were doing their job in a contact center on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (does not correspond at all) to 7 (corresponds very strongly) The scale showed a good internal consistency (Intrinsic Motivation - Cronbach’s $\alpha = 0.90$; Identified Regulation - Cronbach’s $\alpha = 0.82$) in this study.

Level 1 (Employee). Affective commitment. The affective component of commitment was assessed using a translation of the measurement tool proposed by Meyer et al. (1993), which had previously been used with Portuguese contact center employees (Chambel & Sobral, 2011). The scale consists of six items (e.g. “This organization has a great deal of personal meaning to me”), scored by respondents on a seven-point Likert scale ranging from “strongly disagree” (1) to “strongly agree” (7). The scale showed a good internal consistency (Cronbach’s $\alpha = 0.88$) in this study.

Control variables. As gender, age and working hours may be related to contact center employees’ affective commitment (Geraldés et al., 2019), Gender [0 = male and 1 = female), age (in years) and working hours (1 = full time and 0 = part-time) were controlled.

Data analysis

To assess the hypothesized structural models, multilevel structural equation modeling (MSEM) with robust maximum likelihood (RML) estimation, using the 6.12 version of Mplus software (Muthén & Muthén, 1998-2012), was conducted. MSEM provides accurate estimation by differentiating the variance of the variables (Muthén & Asparouhov, 2011): within-level (level-1; due to individual differences) and between-level (level-2; similarity among employees in the same team).

Following Preacher et al. (2010), a 2-1 model for *H1* and a 2-2-1 model for *H2* were tested. The level-2 variables corresponded to the team level of performance-contingent reward, intrinsic motivation and identified motivation and the level-1 variable corresponded to affective commitment. In addition, the effect of working hours (level 2) and individuals' gender and age (level 1) were controlled. Besides the χ^2 statistic, the analysis assessed the Comparative Fit Index (CFI), the Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI), and the Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA). Models with CFI and TLI values above 0.90 and RMSEA values below 0.08 indicate a good fit (Hoyle, 1995). To calculate the significance of the indirect effects on multilevel modeling (Preacher & Selig, 2012), Monte Carlo (MC) confidence intervals were used through Selig and Preacher's web utility (2008).

Results

Aggregation analysis and descriptive statistics

To justify the aggregation of the proposed level-2 variables concerning motivation, the average deviation index [$AD_{M(j)}$] was used as a consensus-based approach (Kozlowski & Klein, 2000), and the cut-off values were fixed below 1.17 for 7-point scales (Burke & Dunlap, 2002). The mean value on the $AD_{M(j)}$ for intrinsic motivation was 0.95 (SD = 0.31), whereas for identified regulation it was 1.04 (SD = 0.31). One-way ANOVAs

were also computed to determine between-unit differences (Chan, 1998). Results indicated significant between-unit discrimination for both intrinsic motivation ($F_{(296, 2070)} = 3.03, p = 0.000$) and identified regulation ($F_{(296, 2070)} = 2.32, p = 0.000$). Taken together, our results supported the validity of the aggregate measure (Bliese, 2000; Burke & Dunlap, 2002). Thus, we used mean ratings to obtain level-2 indicators of intrinsic motivation and identified regulation. Means, standard deviations, and bivariate correlations for all study variables are presented in Table 1.

In general, the overall fit indices of the multilevel structural equation model in which the team level of performance-contingent reward as the level 2 predictor had a cross-level effect on affective commitment at level 1, indicating a good fit (save one exception, TLI): $\chi^2(1) = 2.252, p = 0.1335, CFI = 0.978, TLI = 0.891, RMSEA = 0.023$. The results of the MSEM analysis are shown in Table 2. There was support for the suggested cross-level effect (H1) with a significant positive relationship between the team level of performance-contingent reward (team level) and the affective commitment (employee level) ($B = 0.12, p = 0.001$).

	Range	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
<i>Organizational Level</i>										
1. Working hours	Dummy	--	--	-						
2. Monetary incentive	1-4	2.81	1.32	-0.08**	-					
3. Intrinsic motivation	1-7	3.92	0.77	0.10**	0.18**	-				
4. Identified motivation	1-7	3.38	0.68	0.03	0.30**	0.82**	-			
<i>Individual Level</i>										
5. Sex	Dummy	--	--	0.03	0.03	-0.04*	-0.04*	-		
6. Age	18-66	32.36	8.66	0.19**	-0.09**	0.05*	-0.06**	0.12**	-	
7. Affective commitment	1-7	4.34	1.35	0.09**	0.08**	0.44**	0.39**	0.03	0.13**	-

Notes: * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$. Spearman rank correlation was used when the data were dummy. Pearson's correlation coefficient was computed for interval data

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics and Correlations

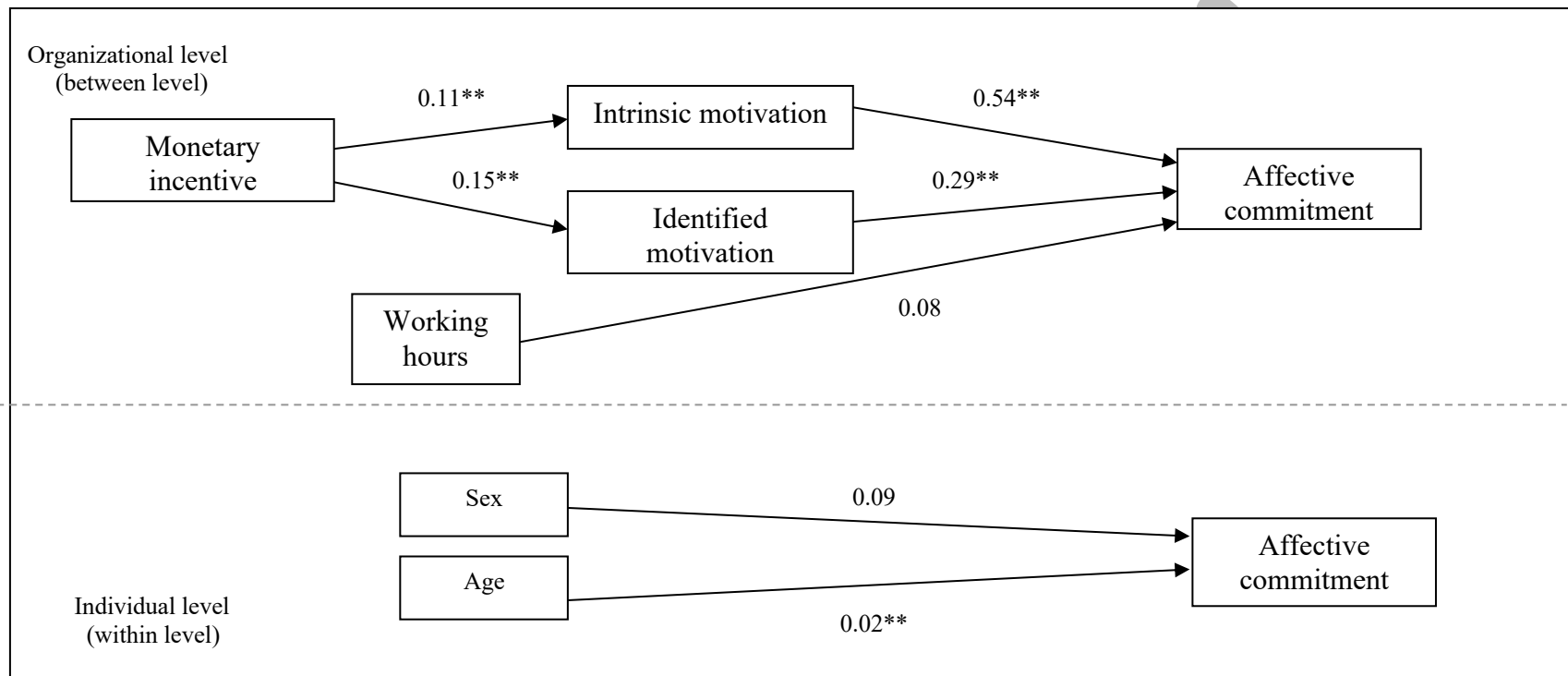
The 2-2-1 multilevel structural equation model showed a good fit: $\chi^2(4) = 17.685$, $p = 0.0014$, CFI = 0.978, TLI = 0.935, RMSEA = 0.038. The results of the MSEM analysis are shown in Figure 2. Regarding H2a, a significant positive relationship between the team level of performance-contingent reward (level 2) and the intrinsic motivation (level 2) ($B = 0.11$, $p = 0.007$), and a significant positive relationship between the intrinsic motivation and the affective commitment (level 1) ($B = 0.54$, $p = 0.000$) may be observed. Moreover, the team level of performance-contingent reward had a positive and statistically significant indirect effect on the affective commitment, through intrinsic motivation (non-standardized estimate of the product of coefficients = 0.06, 95% MC CI = 0.01, 0.11), thus supporting the suggested mediation established in H2a. Regarding H2b, a significant positive relationship between the team level of performance-contingent reward (level 2) on identified regulation (level 2) ($B = 0.15$, $p = 0.000$), and a significant positive relationship between the identified regulation and the affective commitment (level 1) ($B = 0.29$, $p = 0.000$) may be observed. Moreover, the team level of performance-contingent reward had a positive and statistically significant indirect effect on the affective commitment, through identified regulation (non-standardized estimate of the product of coefficients = 0.05, 95% MC CI = 0.02, 0.07), supporting the suggested mediation of H2b.

Figure 2 offers between and within effects for the tested 2-2-1 model (H2).

Affective commitment		
	Parameter	SE
<i>within</i>		
Sex	0.03	0.06
Age	0.02**	0.01
<i>between</i>		
Monetary incentive	0.12**	0.04
Working hours	0.33**	0.10

Note: ** $p < 0.01$. Coefficients are unstandardized

Table 2. Multilevel analysis for 2-1 model (H1)



Note: ** $p < 0.01$

Figure 2. Between and within effects for the tested 2-2-1 model (H2)

Discussion

Identifying the possible antecedents of affective commitment is fundamental for HRM, due to the general positive consequences this emotional linkage has for both employees and organizational outcomes (Cooper-Hakim & Viswesvaran, 2005; Meyer et al., 2002). It is fundamental for contact centers and electronic services suppliers to enhance affective commitment, and the attachment of their operators is crucial to provide increasingly complex services with the high quality required by a competitive market.

Prior literature has substantiated the relevance of socio-emotional exchanges for the development of commitment (e.g., Shore et al., 2009; Tekleab, & Chiaburu, 2011), based on evidence that commitment reflects a positive relationship between separate psychological entities, the individual and the organization (Van Knippenberg & Sleebos, 2006), while evidence on the effect of economic exchanges on attitudes and the affect of employees towards the organization is very weak (Kuvaas et al., 2017; San Martín, 2008). The results of this study enable us to verify the proposal of Cropanzano and Mitchell's (2005) model, which postulates that it is necessary to jointly consider the type of relationship and the type of transaction in a given social exchange. Moreover, the results found in our study prove that when a mismatch situation is characterized by an economic transaction – the level of performance-contingent rewards – it contributes to a social relationship in the context of a contact center employment relationship, and is positively related to employees' affective commitment.

These results confirm one of the models identified by Cropanzano and Mitchell (2005), according to which “exchanges alter the nature of relationships” (p. 888). The contribution of this study focuses on the finding that the exchange that modifies the

relationship is performance-contingent monetary rewards, thus adding to the existing knowledge on commitment antecedents, fundamentally identified in socio-emotional exchanges. Thus, it may be construed that contact centers' employees perceive the expectancy of a monetary reward as a sign of organizational support, and consequently, it is confirmed that perceived support from the organization predicts commitment to the organization (Bishop et al., 2005). Furthermore, meta-analytic results (Kurtessis et al., 2017) have found that perceived organizational support is positively related to performance-reward expectancy, thus reinforcing the argument advanced in this paper. In short, the results of this study are consistent with prior research which has found a significant relationship among extrinsically satisfying job conditions (i.e., extrinsic rewards), perceived organizational support and affective commitment (Rhoades et al., 2001; Stinglhamber & Vandenberghe, 2003). In addition, our results extend the available evidence in contact center contexts, since prior research (Malhotra et al., 2007) has found that among extrinsic rewards, only promotional opportunities are significantly and positively related to employee affective commitment.

As for the role played by team level of performance-contingent rewards, prior research has found that the relationship between group-incentive participation and organizational commitment is mediated by perceived organizational support (Park & Kim, 2013), while our study identified the mediating role of autonomous motivation in such relationship. Thus, this study provides significant insight into pathways through which participation in team performance-contingent incentives affects individual employees' attitudes, expanding our knowledge on the mechanisms that underlie individual employees' attitudinal responses to team incentives (Park & Kim, 2013), and in relation to the effectiveness of team-based rewards (DeMatteo et al., 1998).

On the other hand, the positive relationships identified between the extrinsic reward and the emotional attachment of the employees to the organization, have shed light upon the extent to which this extrinsic factor also contributes indirectly through autonomous motivation (Deci et al., 2017). In turn, in line with the self-determination theory, our results also support that both intrinsic motivation and identified regulation explain employees' positive outcomes (Gagné & Deci, 2005), in this case the affective commitment of contact centers' employees. Although research in the field of reward dimensions and employees' associated preferences tends to differentiate between financial rewards and support rewards (e.g., Chiang & Birtch, 2007), our results reflect that employee perceptions are more complex than what this compartmentalization indicates. In other words, a performance-contingent reward is perceived by the employee as a financial reward but also as an organizational support reward, which contributes both to his/her autonomous motivation and affective commitment. This result has important implications for HRM practices, and may contribute to contact center managers designing their strategies from a more complex perspective and adjusted to the satisfaction of the basic psychological needs of the employees. Thus, according to the self-determination theory, basic need support on the part of organizations may result in high-quality employee motivation and wellbeing, which, in turn, may contribute to long-term occupational health, customer satisfaction and loyalty, organizational productivity, and financial success (Deci et al., 2017), with benefits – material and psychological – for all parties involved in the exchange relationship.

Limitations and future studies

While adding some knowledge to the existing research, this study has certain limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the use of a cross-sectional design means that causal

interpretations are limited. Hence, we suggest that future research test the hypothetical multilevel multiple mediation model examined in this study with longitudinal data. Furthermore, a future longitudinal study would help clarify the possible reciprocal effect between employees' affective commitment and their motivation. In line with the Conservation of Resources (COR) theory, affective commitment is a resource that contributes to employees' motivation (Hobfoll, 2002). Thus, future studies should analyze the hypothesis that employees' affective commitment not only increases with employees' autonomous motivation, but also has a positive influence on this motivation. Second, the sample of this study consisted of contact center employees, an industrial sector that has been characterized by standardized and simple tasks (Batt, 1999; Holman, 2002). As underlined by Deci et al. (2017), performance-contingent rewards may be more effective on algorithmic tasks characterized by simplicity than on heuristic tasks characterized by complexity in the problem's resolution. Future studies are needed in other industrial sectors characterized by more complex tasks to confirm the observations obtained in this study. Furthermore, in line with other studies developed in contact centers (Sobral et al., 2019), we observed that the team's autonomous motivation was low (intrinsic = 3.92 and identified = 3.32 mean, on a scale of 1-7). Thus, future studies in other contexts where employees show high autonomous motivation are needed.

Another important issue to consider in subsequent studies is related to the possible effects of cultural national characteristics, since there may be differences in reward preferences (Chiang & Birtch, 2007) and in perceptions of team rewards (DeMatteo et al., 1998), and consequently, in the responses of employees to reward systems. In a similar vein, future studies should analyze whether a hierarchical

mechanism (i.e. team monetary incentive that is allocated by a team leader or supervisor), instead of a team incentive mechanism (i.e. team monetary incentive that is shared equally among team members), can contribute to solving the potential free-rider problem in teamwork and promote pro-social behavior and cooperation (Drouvelis et al., 2017) in contact center work contexts.

In addition, future research should analyze how affective commitment and attachment dynamics in work relationships, created by the expectancy of monetary rewards and mediated by autonomous motivation, are in turn related to valued individual and organizational outcomes in contact center contexts, contributing to the study of organizational behavior from attachment theory (Yip et al., 2018). Finally, in this study it was hypothesized that the team level of performance-contingent rewards had a positive relationship with autonomous motivation, as this practice satisfied the need for competence or involved a supportive/fair context. However, the significant effect of this reward was not directly evaluated and future research should include these variables as mediators between performance-contingent rewards and employees' motivation.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

Ethical approval: All procedures performed in this study were in accordance with the ethical standards of the Ethic Research Committee of the Faculty of Psychology of the University of Lisbon and with the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.

Conflict of Interest: The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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