

ANTECEDENTS AND OUTCOMES OF SALESPERSON PERCEPTIONS OF ORGANIZATION SUPPORT

By Mark Jolke

An extensive body of research suggests that employee perceptions of organizational support (POS) are not only strongly related to desirable job outcomes but are also amenable to managerial actions. However, little of this research has studied POS within the unique sales force environment, so the antecedents and outcomes of this potentially important form of salesperson support remains unclear. Results from testing the hypothesized Sales Force POS model indicate that, like other types of employees, salespeople respond positively to organizational support but, unlike others, they prefer adequate training to formal recognition in developing their individual perceptions of support.

Salespeople and other boundary-spanning employees often rely on external support mechanisms to help them cope with the high levels of role stress (i.e., ambiguity and conflict) that they experience as part of their job. Fortunately, there are numerous sources of workplace support for employees, including social networks and the organization itself (e.g., Fisher 1985; Kaufman and Beehr 1986), as well as coworkers and supervisors (e.g., Babin and Boles 1996; Ganster et al. 1986). Regardless of its source, workplace support benefits the employee, and therefore the organization also, by alleviating undesirable job outcomes such as susceptibility to chronic disease and other health complications and by facilitating desirable outcomes including job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and performance. Accordingly, researchers continue to study the role of workplace support in improving employee job conditions.

Unfortunately, comparatively little of this research has considered the role of workplace support within the sales force, so our understanding of its potentially distinctive antecedents and outcomes is far less developed. As a result, sales managers may

lack not only an appreciation of the importance of workplace support to their salespeople but also a set of useful guidelines to assist them in providing salespeople with the appropriate types and levels of support. While it would be easy to assume that salespeople respond to workplace support the same as other types of employees, because the salesperson's job is qualitatively different than that of many others (e.g., they work outside the firm, their central task is to interact with and influence customers while at the same time to represent the customer back to the firm, their compensation is based upon performance, etc., etc.) this assumption may not be appropriate. The goal of this research is to extend our current understanding and appreciation of the role of one of the most widely recognized forms of workplace support, perceived organizational support (POS), to salespeople.

More specifically, this research will: (1) review and summarize the research findings on employee POS, (2) identify and apply additional findings from the sales literature to develop a model appropriate for testing POS within the unique sales force environment,

(3) detail the sample and methodology used to test the model, and (4) conclude by discussing the results of the analysis and their implications for managerial decision making. As a result, researchers and sales managers will be provided with a thorough description of the role of sales force POS and with a set of guidelines for building a more supportive sales force environment.

Perceived Organizational Support

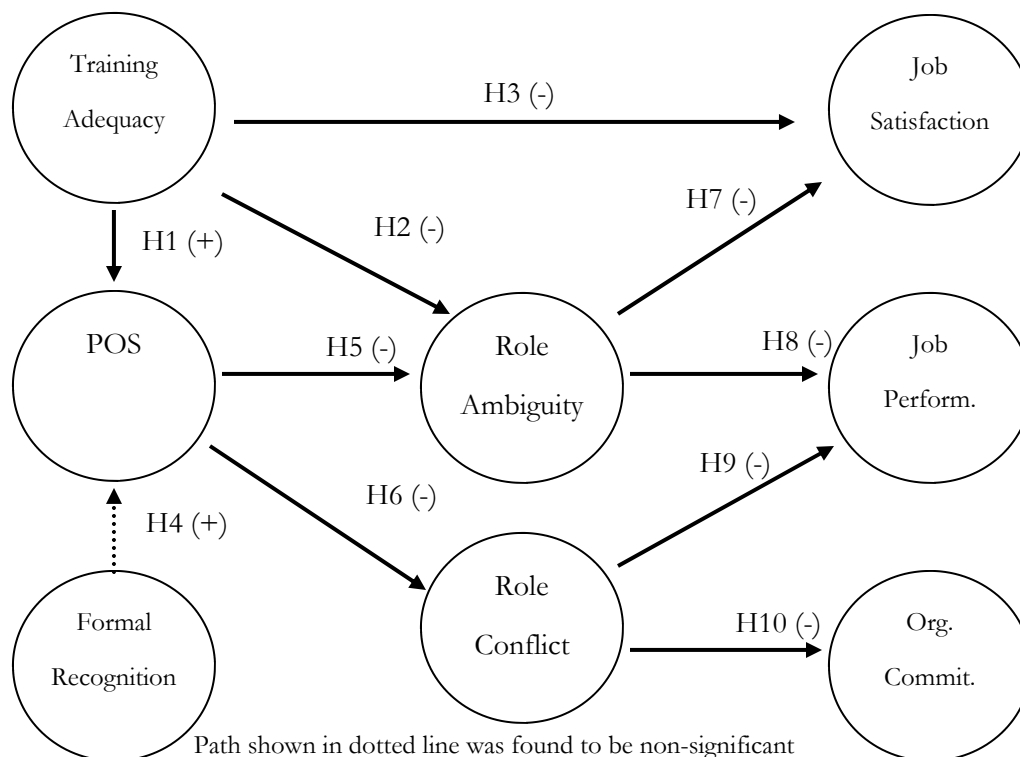
Over the past 20 years, POS has been one of the most widely researched and established forms of workplace support. Defined as the employee's "global beliefs concerning the extent to which the organization values their contributions and cares about their well-being" (Eisenberger et al., 1986, p. 501), POS represents the employee's perceptions of the organization's commitment to him or her. While researchers have investigated a wide variety of potential outcomes from employee POS, Rhoades and Eisenberger's (2002) meta-analysis of the POS literature concludes that "POS had strong relationships...with affective commitment, job satisfaction, positive mood at work, desire to remain with the organization, and turnover intentions. POS had medium relationships with job involvement, strains, withdrawal behaviors short of turnover (e.g., absenteeism and tardiness), and extrarole behavior directed towards the organization. POS had small but statistically reliable relationships with other kinds of performance, continuance commitment, and turnover." In addition, Rhoades and Eisenberger (2002) identified three major categories of POS predictors: organizational rewards and job conditions

procedural justice within the organization, and supervisor support.

One of the most important observations to be drawn from reviewing the body of POS research is that while the role of POS for non-boundary spanning employees has been extensively studied, its predictors and outcomes within the distinct sales force environment have been only lightly considered. This situation is illustrated by noting that Rhoades and Eisenberger's meta-analysis (2002) examined 73 POS studies involving 23,557 subjects, while a separate review conducted for this research identified only seven studies that examined POS among any type of boundary spanning employees, including salespeople. Due to the unique nature of selling tasks, the salesperson's job-related experiences are often quite different than those of internally situated employees and so too may be his/her perceptions of organizational support and the factors that influence it. Given the widespread acceptance of POS as an important component of an effective workplace environment, and that it appears to be associated with many desirable job outcomes, specific research upon the antecedents and outcomes of salesperson POS is clearly warranted.

The Sales Force POS Model

More specifically, what's needed is a specific model of the predictors and outcomes of salesperson POS that takes into account both our general conception of employee POS as well as our specific understanding of salesperson job conditions. Figure 1 presents just such a model. In this model, two important organizational rewards/job

The Sales Force POS Model

conditions that are highly relevant to salespeople (i.e., the adequacy of sales-related training and the amount of formal recognition the firm provides to the salesperson) are hypothesized to be positively associated with salesperson POS. In turn, salesperson POS is hypothesized to be antecedent to and negatively related with both forms of role stress. The proposed model also describes the relations between each form of role stress and three important salesperson job outcomes: satisfaction, performance, and commitment.

Predictors of Salesperson POS

Training Adequacy—Training adequacy refers to the appropriate amount and type of training provided by the firm and may be one of the most powerful organizational/job influences upon salesperson POS. Salespeople are often

some of the most highly trained members of an organization and many firms are increasingly using intangible investments in people, such as training, as discretionary developmental experiences to influence employee job outcomes (Shore and Shore 1995). Employees who are highly valued are likely to receive greater amounts of appropriate training while those who are not so highly valued are less likely to receive these expensive and time-consuming developmental activities. Wayne, Shore, and Liden (1997) found a positive association between training and other firm-provided discretionary experiences and employee POS, while Babakus et al. (1996) report that salesperson perceptions of the firm's support for training are associated with POS. Likewise, salespeople who receive adequate sales-related

training should be more likely to perceive that the firm values and supports them. Accordingly, the following hypothesis will be tested:

H1: Training adequacy is positively related to POS.

Training adequacy may also be associated with two other components of the hypothesized model. The first component, role ambiguity, refers to a lack of clarity regarding role expectations (Rizzo, House, and Lirtzmann, 1970). As role ambiguity entails a lack of understanding or knowledge regarding how salespeople should conduct themselves or accomplish their tasks, it is reasonable to expect that training adequacy is negatively associated with salesperson role ambiguity. Barksdale et al. (2003) found a positive relationship between the salesperson's positive perceptions of training and role clarity, while Henderson (1992) reports a negative relationship between the amount of training physicians receive and their level of role ambiguity. Russ et al. (1998) found the same association in a sample of professional salespeople.

The third outcome that may be associated with salesperson training adequacy is job satisfaction, or "the salesperson's affective feelings or attitudes towards his job, his organization, and his work environment" (Churchill et al., 1976, p. 327). While receiving adequate training may primarily influence the salesperson's perceptions of organizational support, receiving the appropriate amount and type of training could also directly impact the salesperson's affective reactions and attitudes,

such as satisfaction. After conducting a meta-analysis of the relations between various organizational development (OD) methods and employee attitudes, Neuman, Edwards, and Raju (1989) conclude that training is the most effective of all OD methods in improving employee job satisfaction. Also, Russ et al. (1998) and Babakus et al. (1996) found that training is associated with salesperson job satisfaction, while Dobbins et al. (1990) report that employees who receive greater amounts of high quality training are more satisfied in their jobs, especially when they also experience high levels of role conflict (which, of course, many salespeople do). Barksdale et al. (2003) also found a positive relationship between the salesperson's positive perceptions of training and satisfaction. Accordingly, the following hypotheses will be tested:

H2: Training adequacy is negatively associated with role ambiguity.

H3: Training adequacy is positively associated with job satisfaction.

Formal Recognition—Another particularly important type of organizational reward/job condition is the amount of formal recognition granted to an employee. Formal organizational recognition is one way for the company to send a message to an employee about how the firm perceives and values that employee's contributions and actions (Shore and Shore 1995). Wayne, Shore, and Liden (1997) found a positive relationship between the number of promotions received and employee POS. Miceli and Mulvey (2000) report that employee satisfaction with pay is positively associated with POS, while Babakus

et al. (1996) conclude that salesperson perceptions of compensation fairness are positively associated with POS. Rhoades and Eisenberger (2002) report that a broad measure of organizational rewards as well as individual measures of pay and promotions are all positively related to employee POS. These findings lead to the fourth hypothesis:

H4: The amount of formal organizational recognition a salesperson has received is positively associated with POS.

Outcomes of Salesperson POS

Role Stress—Jones, Flynn and Kelloway (1995) and Hutchison (1997) conclude that employee role stress is antecedent to diminished POS. On the other hand, Babakus et al. (1996) found evidence that salesperson POS is antecedent to decreased role conflict. Likewise, the majority of research on salesperson role stress utilizes this "support to role stress to job outcomes" ordering among these types of variables (e.g., Kohli & Jaworski 1994; MacKenzie, Podsakoff, and Rich 2001).

Organizations that value and support their salespeople are more likely to expend the time and effort necessary to provide them with explicit work expectations and instructions, and doing so is likely to decrease the amount of conflict and ambiguity that salespeople experience. Therefore, it is reasonable to expect that salespeople who perceive that their employing firm is committed to them and cares about their well-being (i.e., those who develop enhanced perceptions of organizational support) are also likely to experience lower levels of ambiguity and conflict. Accordingly, in the proposed model

salesperson POS is hypothesized to be negatively associated with both forms of salesperson role stress:

H5: Salesperson POS is negatively associated with role ambiguity.

H6: Salesperson POS is negatively associated with role conflict.

Job Satisfaction—One of the most relevant, and therefore widely examined, employee job outcomes is his or her level of satisfaction. While studies of non-sales personnel commonly assume a direct positive relationship between employee POS and satisfaction, these studies failed to consider the corresponding impact of role stress. Sales research has consistently shown that role ambiguity is a particularly important negative antecedent to the salesperson's level of job satisfaction (e.g., Brown and Peterson, 1993; Babakus et al., 1996; MacKenzie, Podsakoff, and Ahearne, 1998), so the proposed Sales Force POS model includes this important relationship:

H7: Salesperson role ambiguity is negatively associated with job satisfaction.

Job Performance—Like all managers, sales managers are highly concerned with their salespeople's performance in completing their assigned tasks. Rhoades and Eisenberger (2002) observe that POS has only a "small" relationship with employee job performance, while research studying both sales (e.g., Brown and Peterson 1993; Babakus et al. 1996; Singh 1998; MacKenzie, Podsakoff, and Ahearne 1998) and non-sales (e.g., Tubre and Collins 2000) employees strongly indicates that role stressors are significantly and negatively

related to job performance. Therefore, the hypothesized model includes the following relationships:

H8: Salesperson role ambiguity is negatively associated with job performance.

H9: Salesperson role conflict is negatively associated with job performance.

Organizational Commitment—Sales managers are also highly concerned about their employee's level of commitment to, and identification with, the employing firm. Mowday, Steers, and Porter (1979) note that this type of attachment involves employee loyalty, involvement, and propensity to stay. Because salespeople who experience greater levels of organizational commitment are less likely to voluntarily leave, organizational commitment can also decrease the costs and disruptions associated with salesperson turnover. Brown and Peterson (1993), Singh (1998), and MacKenzie, Podsakoff, and Ahearne (1998) report that role conflict is a significant predictor of salesperson organizational commitment, so the final hypothesis comprising the proposed Sales Force POS model is as follows:

H10: Salesperson role conflict is negatively associated with organizational commitment.

Research Method and Results

Measures—All constructs used in this study were measured using established and widely accepted scales. Reflecting how it is commonly operationalized in POS research, formal organizational recognition was measured by adding together the number of promotions and pay raises the salesperson has

received from his/her current employer. Sales performance was measured using six items adapted from Behrman and Perreault (1982). All other variables were measured using multiple item scales utilizing 7-point Likert items ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). Training adequacy was measured with three items adapted from Roberts, Lapidus, and Chonko (1994); POS was measured using five items adapted from Eisenberger et al. (1986); items adapted from Rizzo, House, and Lirtzman (1970) were used to measure role ambiguity (three items) and role conflict (four items); salesperson job satisfaction was measured by adapting four items from Churchill, Ford, and Walker (1974); and organizational commitment was measured using three items adapted from Hunt, Chonko, and Wood (1985).

Sample—Data used to test the model were collected from a sample of professional salespeople from five different national firms (four business-to-business service firms and an insurance firm primarily selling to businesses). Of the 400 questionnaires distributed, 236 were returned, representing a 59% response rate. Before pooling and analyzing the data, means tests were used to determine that there were no significant differences between salespeople employed by the five firms in terms of age, years of selling experience, years with their current employer, gender, type of pay plan, or educational level.

Results—After all questionnaire forms were received, the measurement model was analyzed using the covariance matrix generated by PRELIS 2.52 as input to LISREL 8.54. Each of the completely

standardized path loadings relating an item to its assigned construct is significant (t -value > 2.0) and exceeds 0.58, thereby indicating acceptable convergent validity. Next, chi-square tests for discriminant validity between all constructs were conducted, and sufficient discrimination between all possible pairs of constructs was found. The full measurement model fits the data well (e.g., CFI = 0.98, NNFI (TLI) = 0.98, standardized RMR = 0.047, RMSEA = 0.036, p -value for test of close fit (RMSEA < 0.05) = 1.00) and none of the items exhibited excessive cross loadings (as indicated by their associated modification indices [MI] and standardized expected parameter change [SEPC] estimates). Therefore, the entire set of items was used to analyze the model.

The hypothesized model was also tested using LISREL 8.54 and was found to fit the data extremely well (e.g., CFI = 0.98, NNFI (TLI) = 0.98, standardized RMR = 0.058, RMSEA = 0.037, p -value for test of close fit (RMSEA < 0.05) = 1.00) and 9 of the 10 relationships are supported (90%). Accordingly, the hypothesized model appears to offer an appropriate description of the relations among salesperson POS, role stress, and job outcomes. As hypothesized, salesperson perceptions of organizational support are negatively associated with both forms of salesperson role stress, both of which are negatively associated with desirable salesperson job outcomes. In addition, providing adequate amounts of appropriate sales-related training is positively associated with salesperson perceptions of organizational support and job satisfaction and is negatively related to salesperson role ambiguity.

However, formal organizational recognition in the form of promotions and pay raises, while likely to be valued by the salesperson, is not related to his or her perceptions of organizational support.

Discussion

The Sales Force POS model proposed that adequate sales-related training and greater amounts of formal organizational recognition are positively related to salesperson POS. Of these two organizational/job antecedents, only the salesperson's perceptions of training adequacy were associated with POS (Hypothesis 1; reject Hypothesis 4). Salespeople are often some of the most highly trained members of an organization and likely depend upon the training they receive to improve their skills, deepen their knowledge, and stay abreast of important marketplace developments. This result indicates that salespeople strongly perceive that their employers value and support them when that employer provides greater amounts of high quality training that contributes to the salesperson's career development and success.

Hypothesis 4 projected that the amount of formal recognition salespeople receive is positively related to POS. Unlike earlier studies of internally-situated employees, salespeople were found to clearly prefer adequate training to formal recognition in developing their individual perceptions of support. Because salespeople did not associate greater amounts of formal recognition with the firm valuing and supporting them, the hypothesis is rejected. This situation may arise due to the unique nature of the salesperson's work environment

in that the structure of their often commission-based pay plans is rarely adjusted (e.g., it is fairly uncommon for the commission rate or base to be changed). Additionally, salespeople may not feel that a promotion from one sales level to another (e.g., from "Sales Representative" to "Senior Sales Representative") is necessarily a positive development, perhaps because the accompanying increase in responsibilities may not be accompanied by an attendant increase in rewards or because the opportunity to fill a different position may arise from uncontrollable factors (e.g., that the firm simply needs someone to fill a new territory or to serve as the sales manager; Rhoades and Eisenberger, 2002). Therefore, it appears that sales managers will need to search for other organizational rewards and conditions to stimulate salesperson perceptions that the firm supports and values them.

Training adequacy is also associated with decreased levels of role ambiguity (Hypothesis 2) and increased levels of job satisfaction (Hypothesis 3). Therefore, sales managers should concern themselves with providing adequate sales-related training to not only signal to salespeople that the firm values them, but also as a means to decrease salesperson uncertainty and boost satisfaction. Adequate sales-related training can assist salespeople in developing a repertoire of appropriate behaviors and activity schemas that serve to decrease the salesperson's uncertainty in handling their assigned activities, which is itself related to decreased satisfaction and performance (Hypotheses 7 and 8, respectively). Adequate sales training is also directly associated with salesperson job

satisfaction (Hypothesis 3), thereby further illustrating the importance of providing salespeople with adequate amounts of high quality sales-related training. This finding mirrors those reported by Rhoads and Eisenberger (2002) and, combined with the overall results from this study, supports the basic notion that POS is an important component of an effective sales force environment.

Salesperson POS is negatively related to both role ambiguity and role conflict, thus supporting Hypotheses 5 and 6, respectively. POS appears to be a powerful and controllable means to influence salesperson role stress and sales managers are advised to search for appropriate ways to both support and value their salespeople as well as effective means to ensure that salespeople perceive and understand the organization's support. While the significant contribution of this research is primarily found in its description and testing of the direct antecedents and outcomes of salesperson POS, in order to reflect and be grounded in the body of sales research the Sales Force POS model necessarily includes paths between role conflict and both performance and organizational commitment (Hypotheses 9 and 10, respectively). As expected, both paths are significant, thus mirroring the results widely reported by other sales researchers while also offering additional evidence for the positive role of POS within the sales force.

Guidelines for Developing a Supportive Sales Force Environment

Based upon these findings, the following conclusions can be made: (1) salesperson POS

is indirectly related to certain desirable job outcomes via its negative association with role stressors, (2) salespeople perceive that formal organizational investments in their development and success, in the form of adequate sales training, are a strong signal that the firm values and supports them, and (3) POS appears to be highly relevant and important to salespeople and amenable to managerial and organizational actions. Accordingly, researchers now have a better understanding of the relations among POS, role stressors, and important job outcomes within the sales force, and managers have additional insights regarding the importance of training and POS to their salespeople.

Regarding the importance of training, sales managers are advised to (1) offer newly hired salespeople an immediate round of high-quality sales-related training in order to quickly begin building salesperson POS, (2) provide both new and current salespeople extensive opportunities for on-going training, (3) actively monitor salesperson reactions to the training they receive and to quickly change training materials, methods, etc., that are poorly received, (4) consistently evaluate whether or not salespeople are using and benefiting from the training they are getting, and (5) provide numerous opportunities for all salespeople to choose the type of training they need as well as the methods used to provide training (e.g., class room, OTJ, via the internet, etc.).

Rhoades and Eisenberger (2002) report that employee perceptions of workplace fairness (e.g., procedural justice) and supervisor support are also strongly associated with

improved POS. While these groups of antecedents to POS were not directly examined in the current study, in order to maximize the benefits of improved salesperson POS sales managers may also wish to (1) ensure that salespeople know that their manager and organization recognize that role ambiguity and conflict are an inherent part of their jobs, (2) ensure that salespeople know that their manager and organization supports them in accomplishing their tasks, (3) actively look for opportunities to responsibly “go to bat” for their salespeople when disagreements with customers and others within the organization arise, (4) review their policies and managerial practices to ensure that all salespeople are being treated equitably, (5) provide salespeople with adequate opportunity to have their “say” on important issues as well as adequate notice before decisions are implemented, and (6) ensure that performance reviews and other formal evaluation processes are implemented fairly and reflect the salesperson’s actual performance. These actions, and others like them, will certainly help salespeople understand and appreciate the level to which their employer supports them, and, ultimately, for both the salesperson and the organization to reap the benefits of improved salesperson POS.

Limitations and Future Research

While the Sales Force POS model is found to offer a clearly superior description of the role and importance of salesperson POS, the limitations of this study must be kept in mind when considering these results. First, as neither a longitudinal nor a truly experimental design was used, these results do not allow

making any strictly causal claims. Therefore, future researchers are encouraged to use alternative methodologies that allow testing for causal relations between these important characteristics of the sales force environment. Secondly, while the results support the notion that POS is antecedent to salesperson role stress, as the data is cross-sectional in nature additional research is needed to more rigorously examine this important question. Third, only one category of antecedents was used in this study and it is entirely possible that other antecedents (e.g., fairness, organizational politics, supervisor support, etc.) may also impact salesperson perceptions of support. As POS appears to be strongly related to a variety of desirable salesperson job outcomes, further research to identify a broad range of its antecedents would be welcome. Lastly, the generalizability of these results may be somewhat narrow, as the sample primarily consisted of experienced male salespeople representing only five different firms. It may be that research using less experienced salespeople, those employed in different sales environments, or which utilizes a greater mix of gender and cultural backgrounds would provide significantly different results. Accordingly, future researchers may wish to use more diverse samples to better explore the role of POS in affecting salesperson job outcomes.

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