

THE INFLUENCE OF ROLE AMBIGUITY AND GOAL ACCEPTANCE ON SALESPERSON PERFORMANCE AND COMMITMENT

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A multi-industry sample of industrial salespeople was studied to construct a model that considers the effects of role ambiguity on goal acceptance, salesperson performance, and organizational commitment. Results indicate that role ambiguity negatively affects organizational commitment. Role ambiguity also negatively influences goal acceptance, where goal acceptance positively affects salesperson performance. Further, role ambiguity has no direct impact on sales performance. Implications suggest that sales managers need to have a better understanding of the acceptance of goals by sales agents for optimal job performance and organizational commitment. Specifically, we contend that managers need to work with the sales agents to set apposite goals that are intrinsically accepted by them.

INTRODUCTION

Scholars of personal selling seek to understand and predict the outcomes of salespeople in their role as boundary spanners. Two important outcome behavioral variables that have received significant attention in the sales literature are salesperson organizational commitment and performance. While these outcomes have been well researched, the functions of role ambiguity and goal acceptance as antecedents to these outcomes have received very little attention in the sales literature. These outcomes and antecedents are important to study among salespeople because of the unique role that they face as intermediaries between customers and the organization and the lack of supervision that industrial salespeople have.

Because industrial salespeople are often physically isolated from their organization (Dubinsky et al., 1986), they tend to receive less formal and informal communication from the company. Also, virtual offices are a growing trend in the work environment and are anticipated to heavily influence the field of personal selling (Marshall, Michaels & Mulki, 2007). Salespeople often work with little or no

direct supervision but work closely with a diverse set of role companions (Singh, Goolsby & Rhoads, 1994). Consequently, with less organizational contact, understanding one's role as a salesperson as well as the communication and acceptance of goals will likely become even more critical for optimal performance outcomes and commitment of salespeople.

Intuitively, salespeople seem susceptible to the strain of role ambiguity because they perform so many varied tasks in isolation. If role ambiguity occurs, an individual may suffer a decrease in job performance and organizational commitment (Brown & Peterson, 1993).

Goal acceptance refers to the extent to which organizational goals are totally accepted by an employee (Erez & Kanfer, 1983). The influence of goal acceptance appears relevant as an antecedent because salespeople are driven by performance goals and attaining them is largely contingent upon the acceptance of those goals (e.g. Erez & Kanfer, 1983; Latham & Steele, 1983; Locke et al., 1968, 1978). Thus, in this study, we explore the influence of role ambiguity and goal acceptance as antecedents of performance and organizational commitment within a sales context.

The following section will discuss the variables in the model and the hypotheses. This is followed by the methods and results section.

Lastly, the conclusions, implications, future research, and limitations are discussed.

MODEL DEVELOPMENT

Role Ambiguity and Goal Acceptance

Role ambiguity is defined as a lack of necessary information regarding role expectations for a given organizational position (Rizzo, House & Lirtzman, 1970). Also, role ambiguity refers to an individual's perceptions about the expectations and behaviors associated with his/her role (Kahn et al., 1964). In other words, role ambiguity results when the duties and actions required of an employee are unclear to the employee.

Role ambiguity may occur among salespeople as a result of either the organization or the sales manager not providing sufficient information and training related to the job. In particular, a study by Pettijohn, Pettijohn, and Taylor (2009) revealed that introductory training among salespeople was not adequate (i.e., only 61% of respondents received introductory sales training) and that some minimum level of training should be attained before sales training can have its intended effects such as good sales performance or organizational commitment.

Spreitzer (1996) argued that it is only when individuals understand their roles that those roles can take on personal meaning. Individuals with an understanding of their role can judge the value of their work and therefore experience higher perceptions of meaning. Clear lines of responsibility and authority are related to perceptions of confidence (Conger & Kanungo, 1987). Similarly, clear task requirements and low uncertainty are also positively related to feelings of competence (Gist & Mitchell, 1992). Individuals with clearer role expectations and an understanding of how to work within those roles are likely to feel more competent in selecting and pursuing goals. Those who are uncertain of their role expectations are likely to hesitate or not take the initiative due to feelings of uncertainty (Spreitzer, Kizilos & Nason, 1997).

Specifically, individuals are likely to feel that they have direction in their work environment under low levels of role ambiguity. This

perceived direction creates feelings of being able to plan and take actions to complete tasks, thus increasing self-determination. Therefore, role ambiguity is likely to make individuals feel helpless and consequently reduce their perceptions regarding the impact they have in their work area, thus, reducing their propensity to engage in goal oriented behavior (Spreitzer, Kizilos & Nason, 1997). In contrast, individuals who understand their work roles are more likely to take actions and make decisions that influence results in their work area, thus augmenting their propensity to accept goal oriented behavior (Sawyer, 1992).

Goal Setting Theory. To better explain the relationship between role ambiguity and goal acceptance, we examine goal setting Theory (Locke & Latham, 2002). Goal setting theory is rooted in the notion that most human behavior has a purpose and is directed by conscious goals. Prior to a goal being a motivator, one must accept the goal. Goal acceptance is affected by the importance and belief that that the goal can be attained (Locke & Latham, 2002). Therefore, if an individual experiences role ambiguity and has a lack of experience regarding what he/she is supposed to do and why, then it is also very likely that employee will not have a full understanding or appreciation of the importance of any goal(s) nor a full grasp of the likelihood of attaining the goal(s). Therefore, given the potential for role ambiguity to diminish or eliminate goal acceptance, we offer the following hypothesis.

H₁: Role ambiguity negatively influences goal acceptance.

Role Ambiguity and Organizational Commitment

Past research exploring the relationship between role ambiguity and organizational commitment suggests that role ambiguity indirectly influences organizational commitment (Behrman & Perreault, 1984; Brown & Peterson, 1993; Jackson & Schuler, 1985). However, Singh (1998) contends that there may be a direct relationship between role ambiguity and organizational commitment. Further, Singh (1998) argues that well defined roles can provide guidance to salespeople to evaluate the consequences of staying or severing a relationship. According to role

theory (Katz & Kahn, 1966), salespeople's roles link them to their organization. Also, role theory provides a thorough understanding of the salesperson's response to communication pertaining to his/her role. A salesperson's perception of role clarity may influence his/her behavior, job perception, and perception of the employing organization (Katz & Kahn, 1966; Lopopolo, 2002). In this manner, role ambiguity may negatively influence a salesperson's perception towards his/her organization. Consequently, we hypothesize the following:

H₂: Role ambiguity negatively influences organizational commitment.

Role Ambiguity and Salesperson Performance

Both cognitive and motivational theories suggest that there is a positive association between role clarity and job performance (Kohli, 1985; Singh, 1998). Cognitive theories suggest that role ambiguity may result in ineffectiveness and the misapplication of resources and effort, in turn, reducing job performance (Jackson & Schuler, 1985). In concurrence, motivational theories suggest that an appropriate incentive provides motivation for task performance. According to expectancy theory, the level of effort that individuals apply to accomplish a given task is predicated on their assessment that increased effort will result in increased performance, which in turn will lead to higher incentive (Vroom, 1964). This connection between incentive and effort is augmented by role clarity (MacKenzie, Podsakoff & Rich, 2001). Role clarity aids motivation to apply effort for task performance, thereby enhancing job performance (Jackson & Schuler, 1985). Role ambiguity exists, when a salesperson is unsure of his/her duties and responsibilities (Boles, Wood & Johnson, 2003).

Plausibly, the strain attributable to a lack of clarity of responsibility may lead to sub-optimal performance. This view concurs with I-O psychologists, who have empirically demonstrated a negative association between role ambiguity and performance (Jackson & Schuler, 1985; Tubre & Collins, 2000). This negative association between role ambiguity

and performance is likely to occur in personal selling situations as well.

H₃: Role ambiguity negatively influences salesperson performance. Consequently, there may be a negative relationship between role ambiguity and job performance.

Goal Acceptance and Job Performance

Schwarz (2002) suggests that an effective employee would set clear goals that are consistent with the organization's mission and vision and has the means by which to achieve those goals. Clear goals enable an individual to measure his/her progress toward achieving them. Without clear goals, an individual may have a difficult time solving problems and making decisions, which often leads to conflict. Erez, Earley and Hulin (1985) suggest the specificity with which goals are communicated to the employees significantly increases individual goal acceptance and individual goal acceptance significantly contributes to performance.

Interestingly, goal acceptance may affect both sides of the buyer-seller relationship. O'Donnell, Mallin, and Hu (2008) found that the congruence of goals between the buyer and seller positively affects trust, which in turn directs both parties to find new ways to obtain more positive relational outcomes.

Overall, the extant literature is somewhat mixed regarding the relationship between goal acceptance and job performance. For example, within an industrial selling context, Hart, Moncrief, and Parasuraman (1989) found that increased goal acceptance was an important attribute in the success within the performance of a special situation such as a sales contest. Goal acceptance was also found to be positively associated with job performance based on a meta-analysis (Klein et al. 1999). However, very few of these studies in the meta-analysis involved goal acceptance related to tasks as complex as personal selling. Often, the studies included simple tasks such as adding numbers, reaction time, or card sorting.

In contrast to the findings of Hart, Moncrief, and Parasuraman (1989), Wotruba (1989) found

the opposite relationship between goals and performance. Study findings by Wotruba (1989) revealed that salespeople who set their own goals within the first few months in their job actually had poorer performance ratings. According to Wotruba (1989), a possible explanation for the inconsistency of the goal acceptance-sales performance relationship may be the high complexity of personal selling. Because jobs such business to business selling are complex, sales performance is influenced by more than just accepting a goal. Thus, goal acceptance probably has less of a positive influence on business to business sales performance because of its complex nature.

While the extant sales literature is not consistent regarding the strength of association between goal acceptance and sales performance, we refer to goal setting theory (Locke & Latham, 2002) to explain the relationship. Goal setting theory suggests that a positive association exists between goal acceptance and job performance. Thus, we offer the following hypothesis.

H₄: Goal acceptance positively influences salesperson performance.

Goal Acceptance and Commitment

The relationship between goal acceptance and organizational commitment has not been sufficiently explored in the extant sales literature (e.g., Amyx & Alford, 2005) who did not find a link between salesperson goal acceptance and organizational commitment) but has been elucidated in other literature (e.g., Klein & Mulvey, 1995; Hollenbeck et al., 1989). For example in the Management and Psychology literature, organizational commitment has been found to be characterized by a strong belief in and the acceptance of the organization's goals and values (Porter et al., 1974; Steers, 1977).

Past researchers suggest that goals are regulators of human behavior (Locke et al., 1981; Oliver & Brief, 1983). In other words, individuals are likely to exhibit more commitment to their goals if they first accept the goals. This notion is based on individual's pursuit of justificatory motive for any course of action.

System justification theory provides support for the power of justificatory motives (Jost & Banaji, 1994). System justification theory avers that individuals have the desire to commit their resources to a course of action that has already been accepted by them. This theory is also the basis for explaining such behaviors as escalation of commitment, where individuals exhibit commitment to a given course of action once they have made the initial acceptance of the merits of pursuit of that course of action (Jost & Banaji, 1994). Thus, an individual's acceptance of organizational goals may be the reflection of his/her commitment to his/her job or organization. This view concurs with Lewin (1951), who contends that the process of influencing people to accept a goal may in turn influence their commitment to the actions implied by acceptance of those goals. Consequently, we anticipate high goal acceptance may lead to higher commitment towards the organization to which the goals are related.

H₅: Goal acceptance positively influences organizational commitment.

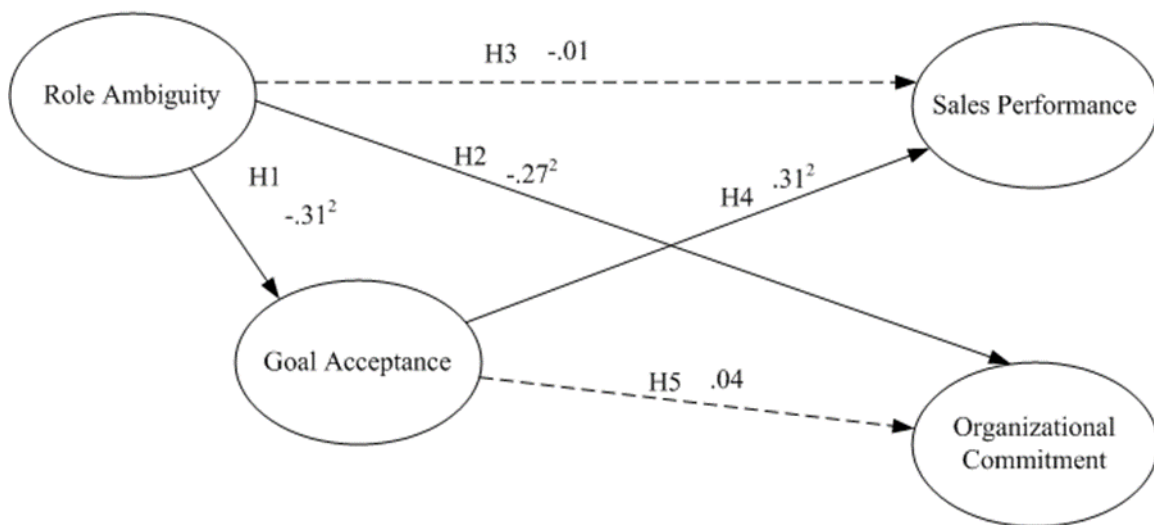
While both organizational commitment and sales performance were included in our model, no hypothesized linkage was made between these constructs. Prior research strongly supports a positive association from organizational commitment to sales performance as revealed in the meta-analysis by Jaramillo, Mulki, and Marshall (2005). Accordingly, we focused on the new relationships in the model. Figure 1 illustrates the study's model.

METHOD

Data

The data reported in the study came from a self-reported questionnaire mailed to 1500 industrial sales representatives geographically dispersed throughout the United States. Each salesperson was responsible for building and maintaining market share in distribution channels or selling direct to end users. Of the 1500 sample, 312 usable questionnaires were returned for a response rate of 20.8%. There was no follow up procedure to capture additional respondents. While the response rate compares favorably

FIGURE 1
Structural Model¹



¹ Un-standardized estimates
² P-value ≤ .05
 Dashed-line path P-value > .10

with other studies of non-sponsored sales force mail surveys (Patton & King, 1992; Chonko, Tanner & Weeks, 1996), the fact that nearly 80% of the targeted sample did not respond suggests that non-response bias may be a concern.

Non-response bias was tested following procedure developed by Armstrong and Overton (1977). The sample was split in half based on the order received by the researchers to produce an early respondent group (166) and a late respondent group (166). The means of the constructs, organizational commitment and sales performance were compared for early versus late respondents using multivariate analysis of variance. The Box’s M test for homogeneity of variances between the two groups was non-significant (p = .194). The multivariate Wilks lambda test was non-significant (p = .355) and the tests of between subjects effects for both organizational commitment and sales performance were non-significant (p = .556, p = .195). In addition, the Levene’s test of equality of error variances for both variables was also non-significant (p = .588, p = .198). These results suggest that there are no significant differences between

early respondents and late respondents, thus non-response bias is not a concern.

A total of 18 categories of salespeople’s industries were identified based on open ended responses. The advantage of having such a diverse sample of salespeople is to increase generalizability of findings rather than drawing conclusions from a single or unique industry. Overall, the top three industry categories were: manufactured business products (11.9%), technology and electronics (11.2%), and insurance (11.2%).

Regarding demographics, the mean age of the sample was 40.4 years. Most of the respondents were male (74.2%) with an average education of 15.4 years. A majority of the sample (63.8%) ranged in education from 13-16 years. The average number of years employed with their current firm was 7.9 years, with one-third of the sample (33.7%) having been with their current firm between 2-5 years. The size of the firms where the salespeople worked ranged from less than 50 employees (30.2%), 50-999 employees (36.1%), to 1,000 or more employees (33.7%). Finally, the number of the salespeople’s previous employers averaged 3.7 firms, with

nearly one-third (28.5%) having worked for 5 or more firms.

Measures

As indicated below, the measures utilized in the study were published using multi-item scales with established reliability and validity. Each of the scales below (except performance) used a seven-point Likert response format (strongly disagree=1 and strongly agree=7) that followed each item.

Role Ambiguity. Role ambiguity was measured using a scale by Rizzo, House and Lirtzman (1970). This scale identified inputs from the environment that provided a knowledge base and guide for appropriate behavior. Modification indices were used to assess each scale. This scale contained three positively worded items and three negatively worded items. The negative items appeared to perform as a separate factor from the positive items. This result has been discussed by Herche and Engelland (1996). Following the recommendation of Herche and Engelland (1996), the negative items were not retained. Thus role ambiguity is a three-item positively worded scale.

Goal Acceptance. Latham and Steele (1983) developed the goal acceptance scale to measure a wide range of issues related to goal setting in the work place. The original five-item scale was reduced to four-items due to one item cross-loading (modification index 22.52) with organizational commitment. The modification indices suggest no changes for the remaining items.

Organizational Commitment. Salesperson organizational commitment was measured on a four-item scale developed by Hunt, Chonko and Wood (1985). This scale was designed to measure the degree of loyalty to an organization, given attractive incentives to change companies (Hunt, Chonko & Wood, 1985). Modification indices suggest no changes to this scale.

Job Performance. Self-reported items were used to measure job performance, which asked the salesperson to rate him/herself in comparison to other sales personnel on three

dimensions of selling tasks. Two items, "sales volume" and "ability to reach sales quota," were selected from the self-reported salesperson performance measures developed by Chonko, Howell and Bellinger (1986). The third item, "total performance," is similar to the "sales objective," dimension developed by Behrman and Perreault (1982). The response categories for each item were similar to those used by Chonko, Howell and Bellinger (1986) but expanded the range from a four point measure (4=better than 75%, 3=better than 50%, 2=better than 25%, and 1=below 25%) to an eight-point measure. That is, the current response categories were: (8=better than 95%, (7=better than 90%, (6=better than 80%, (5=better than 70%, (4=better than 60%, (3=better than 50%, (2=better than 25%, and (1=below 25%. The job performance items of the current study also match closely with the four dimensions used by Soyer, Rovenpor and Kopelman (1999) who measured sales performance as a function of "overall performance," "average sales quota," "most recent quota," and "earnings from sales." The job performance scale was reversed scored for the analysis. Modification indices did not suggest any changes to the scale.

The distribution of our self-rating sales performance scale was skewed with six of the eight response options being 50% or higher. This scale configuration was based on prior evidence in the sales literature where salespeople frequently rate themselves well above average (Chonko, Howell, & Bellinger, 1986), even when they are actually low performers (Sharma, Rich, & Levy, 2005). Empirical evidence of a halo-effect when salespeople self-assess their performance was also supported in our study. Among 312 respondents, only 2.6% (n=8) of the salespeople rated their sales performance as a '1', '2', or '3' (i.e., below 25%, better than 25%, or better than 50% or lower) from a range of 1 to 8.

RESULTS

The measurement characteristics were examined using LISREL 8.51. While a significant Chi Square was found, overall, the remaining fit indices indicate a satisfactory fit to the data (Chi Sq₍₇₁₎ 101.17, p≤.00; RMSEA

= .039; CFI = .97; IFI = .97; GFI = .95; AGFI = .93; standardized RMR = .058; critical N = 257.91).

Table 1 shows the correlations among the measured items. Table 2 provides descriptive and composite-level statistics. The composite reliability ranged from .63 to .86. Bagozzi and Yi (1988) suggest values greater than about .6 are acceptable. The composite reliability values also indicate acceptable convergent validity, since the values are above .50 (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). Discriminant validity is also supported, since the correlations between constructs are less than one (Bagozzi, 1980) and the confidence intervals of plus or minus two standard errors around the correlations do not include the value one (Anderson & Gerbing, 1988).

The average variance extracted ranged from .31 to .68, which is lower than desired according to Fornell and Larcker (1981). Goal acceptance (.31) and organizational commitment (.43) were adapted from previous research performed in the 1970's and early to mid 1980's. Fornell and Larcker (1981, p. 46) state that "the researcher

may conclude that the convergent validity of the construct is adequate, even though more than 50% of the variance is due to error." The average variance extracted statistic is a more conservative estimate than composite reliability. Although the average variance extracted values are lower than desired, the scales have good face validity and their usage adheres to past conceptualization and measurement of the constructs by previous researchers.

Common method bias was assessed using Harmon's (1976) one factor test. The factor analysis of all measurement items did not produce a one factor solution or a solution in which the first factor explained the majority of the variance in the solution. The first factor accounted for only 21.9% of the variance. These results suggest common method bias is not a problem.

The Chi Square for the structural model indicates an unacceptable model fit (Chi Sq (72) 113.5, $p \leq .00$). Examination of other fit statistics indicates an acceptable model fit (RMSEA = .043, CFI = .96, IFI = .96, GFI = .95, AGFI

**TABLE 1:
Correlations**

	Ra1	Ra2	Ra3	Ga1	Ga2	Ga3	Ga4	Per-f1	Per-f2	Per-f3	Oc1	Oc2	Oc3	Oc4
Ra1	1													
Ra2	.28*	1												
Ra3	.30*	.70*	1											
Ga1	.10	.07	.08	1										
Ga2	.24*	.19*	.12*	.39*	1									
Ga3	.25*	.19*	.16*	.46*	.40*	1								
Ga4	.18*	.21*	.19*	.21*	.21*	.24*	1							
Perf1	.21*	.04	.06	.06	.16*	.15*	-.04	1						
Perf2	.14*	.03	.05	.09	.10	.15*	.08	.65*	1					
Perf3	.16*	.08	.08	.12	.17*	.23*	.10	.64*	.72*	1				
Oc1	.04	.20*	.13*	.09	.05	.02	.20*	-.04	.01	.06	1			
Oc2	.05	.18*	.13*	.00	.04	.04	.22*	-.05	.03	.01	.43*	1		
Oc3	.08	.15*	.10	.09	.02	.02	.16*	-.08	-.01	-.01	.45*	.46*	1	
Oc4	.07	.20*	.16*	.00	.07	.06	.18*	-.12*	-.01	-.06	.37*	.55*	.36*	1

*correlation significant at the .05 level

TABLE 2:
Measurement Model

Dimension Item	Means (Variances)	Standardized Estimates ^a	Composite Reliability	Variance Extracted
Performance				
Total performance (R)	6.73(1.42)	.76	.86	.68
Sales volume (R)	6.54(2.12)	.86		
Ability to reach sales quotas (R)	6.63(2.04)	.87		
Goal Acceptance				
I am seldom committed to obtaining the goals that are set for me.(R)	5.57 (2.80)	.60	.63	.31
It is important for me to attain the goals that are established.	6.32 (.74)	.57		
I seldom attempt to attain the goals that are set for me. (R)	6.28 (1.17)	.67		
The goals that are set for me are unreasonable. (R)	5.61 (2.11)	.34		
Organizational Commitment				
I would not be willing to change companies even if the new job offered a 25% pay increase. (R)	3.75(3.97)	.57	.75	.43
I would be willing to change companies if the new job offered more creative freedom.	3.79(3.27)	.77		
I would not be willing to change companies even if the new job offered more status. (R)	3.80(3.26)	.59		
I would be willing to change companies if the new job was with people who were more friendly.	4.88(2.21)	.68		
Role Ambiguity				
I know that I have divided my time properly.	4.79(2.09)	.34	.73	.50
I know exactly what is expected of me.	5.73(1.81)	.87		
Explanation is clear of what has to be done.	5.32(2.14)	.79		

^a All parameters significant $p \leq .05$
(R) Indicates reversed scored items.

= .93, standardized RMR = .061, critical N = 275.89). The evidence suggests that the model does fit the data well enough to examine the hypotheses. Figure 1 provides a summary of the structural model results.

TEST OF HYPOTHESES

The first hypothesis states that role ambiguity negatively influences goal acceptance. This relationship is supported with a significant unstandardized path coefficient of $-.31$ ($t = -3.70$), thus H_1 is supported. The negative relationship between role ambiguity and organizational commitment is the subject of the second hypothesis. With a path coefficient of $-.27$ ($t = -3.38$), H_2 is supported. The next hypothesis asserts a negative relationship between role ambiguity and job performance. The insignificant path coefficient of $-.01$ ($t = -.07$) provides no support for H_3 .

The fourth hypothesis (H_4) suggests that goal acceptance positively influences job performance. The significant path coefficient of $.31$ ($t = 3.76$) supports H_4 . The positive influence of goal acceptance on organizational commitment is the subject of H_5 . With an insignificant path coefficient of $.04$ ($t = 0.40$), H_5 is not supported.

The squared multiple correlations (Table 1) assess the amount of variation explained in the endogenous constructs. The model explains nine percent of the variance in goal acceptance, nine percent of the variance in job performance, and eight percent of the variance in organizational commitment. While nine percent is not as high as desired, it is not out of range for sales research. MacKenzie, Podsakoff and Rich (2001) had four constructs with similar or lower than desired levels of explained variance, two at the five percent level and two at the nine percent level. Interestingly, MacKenzie,

Podsakoff and Rich (2001) explained nine percent of salesperson performance.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The current study offers additional insights into key factors influencing salesperson performance and organizational commitment. First, role ambiguity only has an indirect effect on performance through goal acceptance. Role ambiguity negatively influenced goal acceptance, suggesting that when a salesperson's understanding of his/her role is unclear, that person is less likely to accept goals. Specifically, the setting and ultimate acceptance of goals may not be meaningful or fully appreciated if job tasks, responsibilities, and behaviors are unclear to the salesperson. A heightened sense of role ambiguity thus appears to adversely affect one's motivation to embrace the congruence of personal goals with organizational goals. These results highlight the insidious nature of role ambiguity for a salesperson. That is, as role ambiguity threatens goal acceptance, it jeopardizes the ability of salespeople to effectively act in their role as independent boundary spanners. So if a salesperson does not accept organizational goals, that makes it difficult for him/her to interact with customers in the manner that the organization would prefer and become an effective liaison. Further, our results appear consistent with other research findings that role ambiguity has negative consequences on employee goals and decision making (e.g., Conger & Kanungo, 1987; Gist & Mitchell, 1992; Spreitzer, 1996; Spreitzer, Kizilos & Nason, 1997).

Extending the model's relationship from goal acceptance, we found support for a positive goal acceptance-job performance relationship. This finding is consistent with other research related to goal acceptance and performance (e.g., Mount, Barrick & Strauss, 1999; Klein et al., 1999; Hart, Moncrief & Parasuraman, 1989; Wotruba, 1989). This result further verifies the belief that goal setting and its corresponding acceptance is critical to salesperson performance. That is, the job of a salesperson is one that requires substantial self-motivation as well as a keen understanding of what the organization is seeking to accomplish; thus goals play an important role in preparing one to

make a sale. Further, the sales call goal is the main purpose of a salesperson's contact with a customer (Futrell, 2004) and so its acceptance is vital to the success of any sales call, which ultimately leads to performance. Whether a management by objectives approach is used or goals are handed down by a sales manager, having direction and accepting attainable goals seems essential to successful job performance of salespeople.

Role ambiguity negatively influenced salesperson organizational commitment. This result supports Singh's (1998) contention through role theory that there is a direct negative relationship between a salesperson's role ambiguity and organizational commitment. Role theory (Katz & Kahn, 1966) suggests that through organizational communication, an individual receives information and clarification about job-specific roles and expectations. Thus, when such information is omitted or so non-specific as to create ambiguity, the employee is left with a sense of dissatisfaction or frustration about his/her professional direction and what tasks to perform. Ultimately, role ambiguity has the potential to damage one's relationship with his/her organization. While role ambiguity may be thought of as a factor that harms how an individual perceives his/her roles, responsibilities and duties, the potential damage of role ambiguity extends to one's desire to leave or at least not keep the best interests of the organization in mind.

Role ambiguity may be a particularly problematic concern for salespeople given their roles as highly autonomous, independent boundary spanners between customers and their organization. As the salesperson is the representative of his/her organization, he/she may be the only contact that the customer has with the organization. Therefore, role ambiguity that undermines the salesperson's organizational commitment could not only be damaging to the organization's reputation or long-term relationship, but could also be difficult to determine or immediately resolve given the autonomy of most salesperson's positions. Salespeople may be inclined to act more like independent contractors rather than "loyal" employees who tow the company line. Role ambiguity that is perceived to stem from a

sales manager or the organization may only exacerbate the already heightened predisposition of salespeople to be less than completely committed to their organization. Consequently, a lack of organizational commitment could lead to any number of negative outcomes such as turnover, lack of full effort, or even salesperson deviant behaviors such as interpersonal, organizational, or customer deviance.

It is particularly interesting that while role ambiguity negatively affected goal acceptance, and goal acceptance positively influenced salesperson performance, role ambiguity had no direct impact on salesperson performance. This finding contradicts earlier work by I-O psychologists (Jackson & Schuler, 1985; Tubre & Collins, 2000), who found role ambiguity negatively affecting performance; as well as cognitive and motivational theories that suggest role clarity and job performance are positively related (Kohli 1985; Singh 1998).

Perhaps the best explanation for this result lies in our model. While role ambiguity may translate to affecting goal acceptance and organizational commitment, the unique role of the salesperson may mitigate the effects of role ambiguity on sales performance. In other words, because salespeople must be goal oriented to succeed, goal acceptance may be the critical path to salesperson success.

However, a direct link between role ambiguity and sales performance may not make as much sense given the autonomy and latitude of decisions that salespeople must make. Salespeople must handle high levels of uncertainty. The very nature of their position requires them to be adept at adapting to changing situations, accepting risk and possible rejection, prospecting with imperfect information, following elusive customer leads, and constantly anticipating and responding to nonverbal cues that require imagination and interpretation. Thus, if they are able to deal with a large amount of autonomy because of the nature of their job, they may also be better predisposed to handle ambiguous and constantly shifting roles, negating the significance of the role ambiguity-sales performance relationship in our model.

Contrary to prior sales research (e.g., Locke et al., 1981; Oliver & Brief, 1983), no significant positive path between goal acceptance and organizational commitment was found. While system justification theory (Jost & Banaji, 1994) was not evidenced in this relationship, it is plausible that goal acceptance may not influence salespeople's organizational commitment. For example, Hollenbeck, Williams and Klein (1989) distinguished between goals that were set by the individual and those unilaterally assigned to the individual. If goals are being assigned to salespeople rather than allowing them to set goals using a management by objective approach, then the ultimate impact on one's organizational commitment may be minimal. Unfortunately, no measure of how the goals were derived was taken and this concern is mentioned in the future research and limitations section. Yet, it is both surprising and interesting that the effect of goal acceptance on organizational commitment was negligible among salespeople.

An alternative explanation for the non-significance of the goal acceptance-organizational commitment path is the nature of the sales position. Selling is a position of independence and autonomy. Therefore, it is possible that one may accept organizational goals but still be like a "lone wolf," selling without the organization/sales supervisor looking over his/her back and thus having a feeling of doing things on his/her own. This feeling of being alone could feed a sense of not being supported which would be akin to a lack of organizational commitment.

Overall, this study revealed that role ambiguity, while studied extensively in other disciplines such as management and I-O psychology, needs additional clarification in marketing and specifically among sales force researchers. Specifically, the effects of role ambiguity appear to manifest themselves in a unique and unusual way among salespeople where there is no direct negative link with sales performance, but there is an indirect effect through goal acceptance and a direct negative impact on organizational commitment.

FUTURE RESEARCH AND LIMITATIONS

Future researchers need to continue to study role ambiguity among salespeople because of the distinctly unique nature of salespeople and the position of selling in comparison to other job categories where role ambiguity has been previously used. Accordingly, other outcomes beyond performance and organizational commitment should be examined. For example, key outcomes for consideration may include organizational citizenship behavior, ethical behavior, turnover, employee satisfaction, or burnout. Each of these could conceivably be linked to the effects of role ambiguity. Conversely, the effects of role clarity could be used in place of role ambiguity, given they are opposite sides of the “same coin.”

One may also consider the effects of role ambiguity in different stages of a salesperson’s career life cycle. Intuitively, role ambiguity may have less of an effect on a salesperson who is a veteran of the selling profession, and even less on a veteran who has also been with a company for a long time and received more role clarification earlier on in his/her career. Thus, such variables as length of employment with a firm, experience as a salesperson, or even assessment of role ambiguity/clarity in prior positions could be an interesting area of research opportunity. As a side note, over half of the respondents in the current study had been with their respective firm for six years or more. There appeared to be substantial variation in years of experience in our sample with 33% having been with their firm 2-5 years.

Future research may also include the effect of where the goals originated. By examining where goals come from (i.e., either self-developed or assigned by a sales manager), it may provide additional insight for the underlying reasons of a salesperson’s acceptance and/or commitment of his/her goal (s), which in turn may affect key job outcomes (e.g., job performance and organizational commitment).

A limitation of the current study is its use of cross-sectional data. One could better understand how role ambiguity manifests itself with time series data. While longitudinal data

would be more difficult to obtain, it would be much more enlightening given the effects of role ambiguity.

Another limitation was that only 20.8% of the sample responded to the survey. However, there was no evidence of non-response bias and this percentage is not unusually low compared to other salesperson-based studies.

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