

A meta-analysis of the relationship between organizational commitment and salesperson job performance: 25 years of research

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Abstract

This article presents a meta-analysis that includes studies conducted over the past 25 years across 14 countries and a mix of selling and nonselling situations. Findings indicate that the relationship between organizational commitment and job performance is positive and stronger for sales employees than for nonsales employees. Stronger correlations between organizational commitment and job performance are found for collectivist compared to individualistic cultures. The results are discussed in terms of implications for future sales force performance research.

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1. Introduction

In today's dynamic and competitive markets, the most important challenge sales managers face is designing strategies to improve the performance of the sales force. Sales force functions and activities not only typically constitute the largest portion of a firm's marketing budget but also are a primary source of revenue and are key to organizational success (Cravens et al., 1993; MacKenzie et al., 1998). In view of this, sales organizations have long been interested in identifying variables that influence job performance (e.g., Churchill et al., 1985; Johnston and Marshall, 2003). Research indicates that one such variable is organizational commitment (Vinchur et al., 1998). The primary objective of this study is to synthesize the empirical research investigating the relationship between organizational commitment and salesperson job performance.

Mixed findings exist as to the relationship between organizational commitment and job performance—seemingly

ly more so for nonsales jobs than sales jobs (Meyer, 1997). Researchers have found a positive correlation between performance and organizational commitment in studies of industrial salespeople (e.g., Bashaw and Grant, 1994; Benkhoff, 1997). This relationship has been found to be negative or nonsignificant in the retail and insurance sector (e.g., Leong et al., 1994). Moreover, the relationship between organizational commitment and performance was found to be weak (Mathieu and Zajac, 1990) and mixed (Meyer et al., 2002) in previous meta-analyses conducted in the psychology literature with samples consisting of a variety of sales and nonsales occupations. Such mixed prior results within a phenomenon that is seemingly straightforward warrant further study.

Due to the nature of the salesperson's job and the visible impact of their activities and behaviors on organizational performance, one would typically expect a positive and stronger correlation between organizational commitment and performance for salespeople as compared to nonsales personnel. Their boundary-spanning activities, high level of autonomy in dealing with parties inside and outside the organization, and physical location that is often outside the organizational setting would seemingly require higher commitment than other workers.

The above characterization of sales jobs, coupled with the mixed prior results as to the organizational commitment

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and job performance relationship suggest that the strength of this relationship is likely impacted by moderators. Among the likely moderators are job type (i.e., sales, nonsales) and cultural differences among the countries where studies were conducted (such as individualism vs. collectivism) (e.g., Mowday et al., 1979; Meyer et al., 1993). Identification of factors that impact salesperson performance is a cornerstone within the field of sales force management research (Rich et al., 1999). Our aim is to synthesize the existing research findings concerning organizational commitment and performance within a sales environment, especially in terms of the relevant moderators identified above. To achieve our research objective, a meta-analysis was conducted of 51 empirical studies including 61 effect sizes with an overall sample size of 14,169 from 14 countries. The next section provides the context for our study by explicating three associated research questions.

2. Development of research questions

2.1. Organizational commitment

Two approaches to define organizational commitment are found in the literature. First, commitment is understood as an employee's intention to continue working in the organization (e.g., Meyer, 1997). Second, organizational commitment may be defined as an attitude in the form of an attachment that exists between the individual and the organization, and is reflected in the relative strength of an employee's psychological identification and involvement with the organization (e.g., Mowday et al., 1979). This research concurs with the second definition for two reasons. First, the conceptual distinction between organizational commitment and intentions to leave and the directionality of such relationship are evident in the literature (e.g., Allen et al., 2003; Johnston et al., 1990; Schwepker, 2001). Second, the attitudinal approach is prevalent in the organizational commitment definition (Spector, 2002) because organizational commitment represents the attitudes that employees have towards the organization, rather than their intentions to leave.

Organizational commitment by salespeople is important because of the demonstrated positive relationships between it and several variables related to job performance such as customer-oriented selling (Flaherty et al., 1999), turnover intentions (e.g., Johnston et al., 1990; Bashaw and Grant, 1994), absenteeism (e.g., Farrell and Stamm, 1988), and job satisfaction (e.g., Low et al., 2001; Schwepker, 2001).

2.2. Job performance

Job performance is a critical and central issue in sales management. Job performance assessment provides information for managerial decisions on compensation, promotion, and training as well as a basis for improving

performance or recommending termination (Piercy et al., 1998). Academic researchers have used subjective measures of performance most frequently because of the difficulty of obtaining objective data (Bommer et al., 1995; Benkhoff, 1997). Typical of subjective measures are scales such as those developed by Behrman and Perreault (1982) or Babakus et al. (1999) and assess performance aspects such as technical knowledge, teamwork, presentation, and planning skills. Only 1 out of 51 studies included in this meta-analysis used an objective measure of job performance. Reflective of the general trend in prior work, we offer the following research question:

Research Question 1: Is organizational commitment positively related to job performance overall?

2.3. Potential moderators of the organizational commitment and job performance relationship

Earlier, we presented evidence from prior literature that the relationship between organizational commitment and job performance has generally been strongly positive within salesperson samples, but weak or mixed within other samples. Such mixed results often indicate that moderating variables are influencing the strength of the relationship (Meyer, 1997). Potential moderators may be classified into two groups: organizational and contextual.

2.3.1. Organizational moderators (job type)

As established earlier, organizational commitment has been a subject of interest for both sales and nonsales employees. In addition to studies of sales employees, studies of organizational commitment and job performance include bank employees (Benkhoff, 1997), government workers (Balfour and Wechsler, 1991; Yousef, 2000), managers in industrial companies (Suliman and Iles, 2000), first-level managers and supervisors (Orpen, 1997), scientists and engineers (Mathieu and Farr, 1991; Keller, 1997), and many others.

As also previously noted, the unique nature of the sales job makes it worthwhile to study potential differences in the relationship between organizational commitment and job performance for sales versus nonsales employees. Respondents drawn from studies included in this meta-analysis were classified into three groups: salespeople, nonsales, and mixed. Sales respondents included insurance agents, retail salespeople, business-to-business salespeople, frontline sellers, and salespeople in the direct-selling industry, among others. Respondents were classified as *salespeople* when the study specifically stated that the sample was drawn from salespeople. For example: "their current job position was frontline selling" (Singh, 1998, p. 74) and "we surveyed all the sales representatives. . ." (Russ and McNeily, 1995, p. 59). Respondents were classified as *nonsales* when the studies indicated that the sample came from nonsales departments (i.e., research and development, accountants, human

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