



Emotions and salesperson propensity to leave: The effects of emotional intelligence and resilience



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ABSTRACT

Emotions constitute a powerful psychological force that can significantly influence the behavior and performance of salespeople. However, emotions in the workplace still constitute an under-developed area of study, mainly in the field of sales. Sales turnover is also particularly important in relation to sales management due to the nature of sales positions, their historically high turnover levels, and the difficulty involved in filling them.

In view of the need to broaden knowledge on how to more successfully retain valuable salespeople, and the fact that B2B selling jobs are not the same across the board, this paper, while controlling the type of selling situation, analyzes the influence of two emotional skills (i.e. emotional intelligence and resilience) on salesperson propensity to leave their organization, both directly and indirectly, through their impact on work–family conflict and emotional exhaustion. The moderating effect of servant leadership perceived by salespeople on the relationship between emotional exhaustion and intention to leave is also addressed. Information provided by 209 salespeople from 105 enterprises from various industries confirms the hypotheses put forward and highlights the importance of encouraging the development of emotional skills as a way of alleviating work stress and reducing salesperson turnover. In addition, the results confirm the contribution of servant leadership towards reducing the effect of emotional exhaustion on salesperson intention to leave.

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1. Introduction

Emotions are a strong psychological force that can significantly influence salesperson behavior and performance (Kidwell, Hardesty, Murtha, & Sheng, 2011). Although it is generally accepted that emotions are an inherent part of the workplace, job-related emotions still constitute an under-developed area of study, particularly in relation to sales.

This study attempts to broaden existing literature by exploring the influence of two variables of an emotional nature (emotional intelligence (EI) and resilience) on salespeople's intention to leave their organization. Research has addressed the issue of turnover for decades. However, recent literature confirms that this problem persists (Aggarwal, Tanner, & Castleberry, 2004; Fournier, Tanner, Chonko, & Manolis, 2010). In the sales domain, the retention of talented salespeople has proven to be one of the most on-going and confusing problems currently facing managers (Boles, Dudley, Onyemah, & Rouzies, 2012).

In fact, sales positions are subject to the highest turnover rate and are the most difficult positions to fill (Rivera, 2007). Given that sales force turnover has become a great concern for sales organizations because of its impact on business results (Mulki & Jaramillo, 2011), recent studies encourage researchers to improve their understanding of how to more successfully retain valuable salespeople (Boles et al., 2012).

Emotional intelligence (EI) was initially proposed in 1990 by Salovey and Mayer (1990) and is defined as the ability to acquire and apply knowledge from one's emotions, as well as those of others, to produce beneficial outcomes. Although EI has received a substantial amount of attention from organizational behavior, human resources, and management literature, this ability-based conceptualization has been largely ignored by marketing literature (Kidwell et al., 2011). In their recent meta-analysis, O'Boyle, Humphrey, Pollack, Hawver, and Story (2011) suggested that researchers analyze the contribution of EI to jobs that require emotional effort and customer interaction (e.g. sales jobs). However, despite having been suggested as an important factor in sales efficiency, very few studies have analyzed this variable within a sales context (Kidwell et al., 2011). In addition, although the EI construct is universal, the individual behaviors arising there can vary depending on the individual's specific culture (Law, Wong, & Song, 2004).

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The ability to handle one's own feelings and impulses is a reflection of high EI and, according to the American Psychological Association, a characteristic of a resilient personality. *Resilience* is a component of psychological capital⁴ and refers to a process that facilitates overcoming difficulties, emerging from experiences as a stronger person, and developing skills despite being exposed to high levels of psychological stress (León García-Inquierdo, Ramos-Villagrasa, & García-Izquierdo, 2009). This state-like construct is a strategy used for surviving and prospering in the face of workplace adversity. Although research on resilience within an organizational context is limited, there is evidence to suggest that this variable positively influences performance (Coutu, 2002; Harland, Harrison, Jones, & Reiter-Palmon, 2005; Luthans, Vogelgesang, & Lester, 2006; Luthans et al., 2007).

This study analyzes WFC and salesperson emotional exhaustion as mediating variables in the influence of EI and resilience on salesperson propensity to leave. WFC can arise in any kind of job, but the stressful nature of sales positions makes salespeople more likely to suffer from this conflict than other employees. Sales literature confirms that WFC has a more negative effect on job satisfaction within a sales context than in other employment contexts (Boles, Johnston, & Hair, 1997; Boles, Wood, & Johnson, 2003). This research paper considers one of the two dimensions of WFC, i.e. work interference with family (WIF), since this dimension is mostly associated with job satisfaction and exhaustion (Bacharach, Bamberger, & Conley, 1991).

Emotional exhaustion refers to feeling emotionally worn out as a result of chronic work-related stress and is characterized by professional debilitation. The unique characteristics of the sales profession contribute towards emotional exhaustion, which is considered as the key dimension of the burnout syndrome (the three dimensions are emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and diminished personal accomplishments), and of which depersonalization and diminished personal accomplishments are predictors.

The model presented also addresses the relationship between emotional exhaustion and salesperson intention to leave, as well as analyzing the moderating role of the *servant leadership* exercised by the supervisor and perceived by the salesperson. Servant leadership is currently considered a promising area of study for organizational research (Van Dierendonck, 2011), represents immense managerial commitment to employees, and is defined as “a way of understanding and carrying out leadership by prioritizing the welfare of followers over the leader's interests” (Laub, 1999, p. 25).

Up to now, research on workplace emotions and turnover, carried out within the sales context, has analyzed a single sales organization (which gives rise to external validity problems) and an aggregate sample obtained by mixing heterogeneous sales populations (which involves the risk of obtaining inaccurate and restricted results). In both these cases, the fact that B2B selling jobs are not the same across the board (Moncrief, 1986) is ignored. As Avila and Fern (1986) affirm, different sales positions are characterized by diverse situational and environmental constraints, which implies that salesperson objectives, roles, and activities vary largely across the various selling situations (Avlonitis & Panagopoulos, 2006). In this respect, previous research has underlined the importance of controlling the type of selling situation when analyzing interrelationships among salesperson characteristics, attitudes, and behaviors (Avlonitis & Panagopoulos, 2006; Brown & Peterson, 1993; Churchill, Ford, Hartley, & Walker, 1985).

In short, the main purpose of this study is to contribute towards existing literature by exploring the influence of resilience and EI on both emotional exhaustion and turnover, and on WFC, EI, and turnover, respectively, while controlling the type of selling situation (see Fig. 1). As we are aware that combining diverse sales populations into an aggregate sample can give rise to inaccurate conclusions, the initial model proposed is compared with a second model in which the selling situation acts as a moderating variable in the relationships proposed. In addition, an analysis of perceived servant leadership as a moderator of the relationship between emotional exhaustion and turnover is performed in order to provide new insights into the relationship between this core dimension of the burnout syndrome and sales turnover.

The proposed model does not represent a comprehensive model of all the antecedents of salesperson turnover intention, but instead focuses on the influence of a series of affective variables on salesperson turnover intention, while analyzing the interrelationships between them. These affective variables are: emotional skills (EI and resilience, which have been identified as important in a sales context but scarcely analyzed until now); emotional state (emotional exhaustion, which is a key dimension of burnout, especially when it comes to salespeople); work–family conflict; and the perception of supervisor behavior (i.e. service leadership) in terms of importance placed on human capital and consideration shown towards others.

2. Conceptual background and hypotheses

2.1. Resilience

According to Jackson, Firtko, and Edenborough (2007), the development of resilience as a concept began in the 1800s and continues today. However, the majority of resilience studies carried out to date have focused on children and young people (Bonanno, 2004). In organizational literature, an awareness of the benefits of resilience for organizations and employees has recently surfaced through studies on positive dispositions (e.g. Harvey, Blouin, & Stout, 2006), demonstrating that this construct is applicable and related to performance in the workplace (Yousef & Luthans, 2007). Studies that analyze resilience within a sales context are almost non-existent. However, the nature of the sales position itself, and the fact that salespeople tend to be more reliant on their own abilities to manage the challenges facing them and less reliant on external support, highlight the importance of resilience to the work of salespeople. In this respect, the study conducted by Krush, Krishnakumar, Agnihotri, and Trainor (2012) confirmed that this variable is positively related to adapted sales and salesperson motivational control, and negatively related to salesperson anxiety levels.

Resilience is defined as the ability to bounce back from hardship, recover, emerge stronger than before, and develop social, academic, and vocational skills despite having been subjected to severe physiological stress⁵ (Csikszentmihalyi, 1999). Considered as one of the dimensions of psychological capital (Luthans, Avey, & Patera, 2008), resilience has

⁴ Psychological capital is defined as an individual's positive psychological state of development and is characterized by: (a) having confidence (self-efficacy) to take on and put in the effort required to succeed at challenging tasks; (2) positively regarding success now and in the future (optimism); (3) trying to reach goals in order to succeed (hope); and (4) when affected by problems and adversity, carrying on and bouncing back and possibly even beyond (resilience) in order to achieve success (Luthans, Avolio, Avey, & Norman, 2007, p. 3).

⁵ Resilience is closely related to the concept of ego strength (Block & Block, 1980). In fact, characteristics such as hardiness, competence, resilience, and ego strength have sometimes been used synonymously to characterize individuals who have the abstruse ability to endure stress without allowing it to permanently affect them (Kolar, 2011). In this respect, for some authors (Block & Kremen, 1996), the term resilience is considered as modern jargon for what an earlier generation of psychologists labeled ego strength. For others, however, resilience refers to the observed phenomenon of survivorship, a positive psychological capacity to bounce back from adversity (Luthans et al., 2007), and ego strength, like spirituality or work–team cohesion for example, is considered to be one of the factors that contribute to resilience at individual level (Reich, Zautra, & Stuart Hall, 2010). It has also been suggested that resilience includes the personal quality of ego strength (Kadner, 1989), and that resilient individuals possess an internal focus of control (Block & Block, 1980), self-efficacy, and/or ego strength (Casella & Motta, 1990; Markstrom & Marshall, 2007).

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