The effects of mentoring on salesperson commitment

Nathaniel N. Hartmann [a,1], Brian N. Rutherford [b,*], G. Alexander Hamwi [c,2], Scott B. Friend [d,3]

[a] *Shidler College of Business, University of Hawaii, Department of Marketing, 2404 Maile Way, Honolulu, HI 96822, United States*
[b] *Kennesaw State University, Department of Marketing and Professional Sales, 1000 Chastain Road, Kennesaw, GA 30144, United States*
[c] *Missouri State University, Department of Marketing, 901 S. National Avenue, Springfield, MO 65897, United States*
[d] *University of Nebraska—Lincoln, Department of Marketing, 512 N. 12th Street, Lincoln, NE 68588, United States*

ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

This paper examines the impact of having a mentor on mentoree affective, continuance and normative commitment to the organization and occupation. Hypotheses are developed comparing salespeople with and without mentors, and mentorees with mentors inside and outside of the organization. Data was collected from a national sample of salespeople. The results indicate that having a mentor is positively associated with mentoree affective and normative organizational commitment, and affective, continuance and normative occupational commitment. Results also indicate that organizational mentors, as opposed to external mentors, are more strongly associated with mentoree affective and normative organizational commitment. Finally, organizational mentors do not have a greater impact on the facets of mentoree occupational commitment than mentors outside of the organization.

© 2012 Published by Elsevier Inc.

1. Introduction

Organizations spend billions of dollars annually to reduce employee turnover and increase performance (Galvin, 2001). Firms can reduce turnover while increasing performance by increasing employee organizational commitment (Meyer, Stanley, Herscovitch, & Topolnytsky, 2002) and occupational commitment (Lee, Carswell, & Allen, 2000). Research suggests that the development of mentoring relationships is one method of increasing organizational commitment (e.g., Brashear, Bellenger, Boles, & Barksdale, 2006) and occupational commitment (e.g., Colarelli & Bishop, 1990). Given this, it is not surprising that more than 70% of Fortune 500 companies have mentoring programs (Bridgeford, 2007), despite the intensive resource investments required.

This study seeks to expand the understanding of the effects of mentoring relationships on salesperson commitment. By better understanding the effects of mentoring relationships on organizational commitment and occupational commitment, sales managers can develop and maintain sales forces that are more effective and longer-tenured; increasing performance and reducing turnover and its associated costs. This study offers three noteworthy contributions. First, this study is focused within the sales context. Given that salespersons operate in a boundary spanning role with greater ambiguity, less oversight, more discretionary

influence (Aldrich & Herker, 1977; Singh, 1998) and are subject to influence from a wider range of sources than most professions (Singh & Rhoads, 1991), salespeople provide an important and unique setting to examine the impact of mentoring. Due to sparse research examining the outcomes of mentoring on mentorees within the sales context (e.g., Brashear et al., 2006), this study is particularly relevant to organizations seeking beneficial outcomes resulting from increased salesperson commitment.

Second, this study not only examines the effects of mentoring on salesperson commitment, but also the differential effect of the source of the mentoring relationship. Existing mentoring research often fails to examine the source of the mentoring relationship (e.g. Colarelli & Bishop, 1990; Donaldson, Ensher, & Grant-Vallone, 2000). Studies which do examine the source of the mentoring relationship often do so by comparing formal to informal mentoring relationships. This approach has considerable limitations given the ambiguous and wide-ranging definitions of formal and informal mentoring relationships (Haggard, Dougherty, Turban, & Wilbanks, 2011). To yield increased clarity of the effects of mentoring and the source of mentoring on commitment, this study categorizes the source of the mentoring relationship as within the organization or external to the organization.

Third, this study examines organizational and occupational commitment using a multi-faceted approach. Given a growing body of research suggesting that antecedents and outcomes are unique to each of the commitment facets (Meyer et al., 2002; Organ & Ryan, 1995), focus is placed on the effects of mentoring and the mentor source on each facet. Hence, organizations can seek specific outcomes by implementing mentoring programs or emphasizing a mentor source associated with that particular facet.

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +1 770 794 7708(office); fax: +1 678 797 2464.
 E-mail addresses: HartmannNathan@gmail.com (N.N. Hartmann), bruther1@kennesaw.edu (B.N. Rutherford), AlexHamwi@MissouriState.edu (G.A. Hamwi), sfriend2@unl.edu (S.B. Friend).
 [1] Tel.: +1 808 956 6692(office); fax: +1 808 956 9886.
 [2] Tel.: +1 417 836 5541(office); fax: +1 417 836 4466.
 [3] Tel.: +1 402 472 0660(office); fax: +1 402 472 9777.

2. Literature review and hypothesis development

2.1. Mentoring

Mentoring relationships are intense interpersonal relationships entered into by parties in order to provide at least one of the parties with career growth. Kram (1985) defines mentoring as a "relationship between a younger adult and an older, more experienced adult [who] helps the younger individual learn to navigate the adult world and the world of work" (p. 2). Given the different types of support provided by mentors, all employees do not seek mentors from the same source, but rather employees seek out organizational mentors or external mentors based on their skill development agendas (Eby, 1997; McManus & Russell, 1997; Peluchette & Jeanquart, 2000).

In organizational mentoring relationships both the mentor and mentoree are employed by the same organization, while in external mentoring relationships the mentor is not employed by the same organization as is the mentoree. Relative to external mentors, organizational mentors are believed to offer greater organizational resources and availability, as well as greater protection, sponsorship and challenging assignments (Brashear et al., 2006; Ragins, 1997). External mentors are believed to offer greater inter-organizational resources and career opportunities (Ragins, 1997).

2.2. Organizational commitment

Organizational commitment receives significant research interest in the sales literature given its association with job satisfaction and turnover intentions (e.g. Johnston, Parasuraman, Futrell, & Black, 1990; Rutherford, Boles, Hamwi, Madupalli, & Rutherford, 2009; Schwepker, 2001). Organizational commitment is "the relative strength of an individual's identification with and involvement in a particular organization" (Mowday, Steers, & Porter, 1979, p. 226) and consists of affective, continuance and normative facets (Allen & Meyer, 1990). Affective organizational commitment refers to the strength with which one "identifies with, is involved in and enjoys membership in, the organization" (Allen & Meyer, 1990, p. 2). Continuance organizational commitment refers to the perceived costs an individual associates with leaving an organization (Allen & Meyer, 1990). Normative organizational commitment refers to one's feelings of responsibility and obligation to remain with the organization (Allen & Meyer, 1990).

Ragins, Cotton, and Miller (2000), using a global organizational commitment measure, report that mentorees experience higher levels of organizational commitment than do non-mentorees. While mentoring relationships receive limited research attention within the sales domain (e.g., Fine & Pullins, 1998; Pullins & Fine, 2002; Pullins, Fine, & Warren, 1996), Brashear et al. (2006) indicate that salespeople with mentors report greater levels of affective and continuance organizational commitment than do salespeople without mentors. While sales researchers have only examined the relationship between mentoring and affective and continuance commitment, mentoring may also impact normative commitment by increasing one's feeling of responsibility and obligation to the organization.

H1. Salespeople with mentors will exhibit higher levels of (a) affective, (b) continuance and (c) normative organizational commitment than will salespeople without mentors.

Brashear et al. (2006) demonstrate the impact of organizational mentors on mentoree organizational commitment, but do not specifically hypothesize differences between mentorees with organizational mentors and mentorees with external mentors. Brashear et al. (2006) report mentorees with organizational peer mentors (3.25) and managerial mentors (3.29) report higher mean levels of continuance commitment than do mentorees with external mentors (3.11) but these differences are not significant.

The mentoring literature relies heavily on social exchange theory to understand mentor–mentoree relationships (Brashear et al., 2006; Ensher, Thomas, & Murphy, 2001; Olian, Carroll, & Giannantonio, 1993). Social exchange theory assumes individuals develop, maintain, or dissolve relationships based on the relationships' perceived benefits and costs (Emerson, 1981). An example of such costs includes considerations by salespeople with internal mentors who may perceive that the relationship they have established would be damaged should they leave the organization. Thus, as an extension of this concept, mentorees with organizational mentors may attribute the support received from the mentor to the organization.

H2. Salespeople with organizational mentors will exhibit higher levels of (a) affective, (b) continuance and (c) normative organizational commitment than will salespeople with mentors external to the organization.

2.3. Occupational commitment

Occupational commitment is "a person's belief in and acceptance of the values of his or her chosen occupation or line of work and a willingness to maintain membership in that occupation" (Vandenberg & Scarpello, 1994, p. 535). Occupational commitment consists of affective, continuance and normative facets (Meyer, Allen, & Smith, 1993). Affective occupational commitment is the magnitude with which one identifies, is involved in and enjoys membership with the occupation (Meyer et al., 1993). Continuance occupational commitment is the perceived costs an individual associates with leaving the occupation (Meyer et al., 1993). Normative occupational commitment refers to one's feelings of responsibility and obligation to the occupation (Meyer et al., 1993).

While sales researchers have not examined the relationship between mentoring and occupational commitment, non-sales researchers find a significant association between mentoring and mentoree occupational commitment (Colarelli & Bishop, 1990; Ragins et al., 2000). Colarelli and Bishop (1990) examine mentoree occupational commitment using a sample of MBA students and professional chemists, while, Ragins et al. (2000) use a sample of social workers, engineers and journalists.

Given these findings, the relationship between mentoring and mentoree occupational commitment may generalize to salespeople. Salespeople with a mentor have an additional resource with whom to identify with professionally and personally, dedicate time to and receive benefits from. Mentors may also provide salespeople with an additional source of training and knowledge that they may lose should they elect to leave the profession. Further, salespeople with mentors may feel a sense of responsibility and obligation to remain within the occupation so that they can utilize the training and knowledge provided by their mentor.

H3. Salespeople with mentors will exhibit higher levels of (a) affective, (b) continuance and (c) normative occupational commitment than will salespeople without mentors.

The association between formal and informal mentoring relationships and level of career-related and psychosocial support (e.g., Ragins & Cotton, 1999) provide an extension into the organizational and external mentorship context. Due to greater accessibility, protection, sponsorship, challenging assignments and organizational resources provided by organizational mentors (Brashear et al., 2006; Ragins, 1997), salespeople with organizational mentors may attribute greater benefits and diminished costs to their occupation. If salespeople with organizational mentors perceive greater benefits and diminished costs than salespeople with external mentors, social exchange theory would suggest that salespeople with organizational mentors will report higher levels of affective, continuance and normative commitment than do salespeople without organizational mentors.