

Reducing emotional exhaustion and increasing organizational support

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this study is to explore stressors that may influence salespersons' emotional exhaustion and their perception of organizational support.

Design/methodology/approach – Structural equation modeling is used to assess: the effects of role conflict and work-family conflict on emotional exhaustion; role conflict and role ambiguity's effects on perceived organizational support; and whether perceived organization support is directly or indirectly linked to emotional exhaustion.

Findings – Findings from the study suggest that work-family conflict and role conflict both significantly affect emotional exhaustion. Work-family conflict also was found to impact on the relationship between perceived organizational support and emotional exhaustion. Finally, role conflict and role ambiguity were found to have a negative impact on perceived organizational support.

Originality/value – This study provides a foundation for reducing salespersons' emotional exhaustion and provides a method of increasing a salesforce's perception of organizational support.

Keywords Sales force, Emotional dissonance, Stress, Work psychology, Family

Paper type Research paper

An executive summary for managers and executive readers can be found at the end of this article.

Introduction

Emotional exhaustion (e.g. Babakus *et al.*, 1999; Jaramillo *et al.*, 2006) and perceived organizational support (e.g. Eisenberger *et al.*, 2002; Piercy *et al.*, 2006) have received increased attention in the sales and marketing literature within the last decade. In these studies, researchers have linked emotional exhaustion to important salesperson job attitudes and behavior intentions such as satisfaction (Babakus *et al.*, 1999; Jaramillo *et al.*, 2006), organizational commitment (Babakus *et al.*, 1999) and turnover intentions (Boles *et al.*, 1997). Research also has linked perceived organizational support to organizational commitment, job satisfaction, organizational citizenship behavior (Babakus *et al.*, 1999) and employee turnover (Boyle, 1997). Thus, emotional exhaustion and perceived organizational support are important constructs in sales management settings.

While previous research has examined the relationships of emotional exhaustion and perceived organizational support

with a variety of important job place attitudes and behaviors, our understanding of the inter-relationships between these two constructs is limited. This study contributes to the existing body of research in marketing by examining the inter-relationships between these constructs and three types of stressors:

- 1 role conflict;
- 2 role ambiguity; and
- 3 work-family conflict.

With a better understanding of the relationship between emotional exhaustion and perceived organizational support and their possible antecedents, firms may be able to:

- 1 reduce emotional exhaustion;
- 2 increase perceived organizational support;
- 3 ultimately increase employee job satisfaction as well as organizational commitment; and
- 4 reduce employee turnover intentions.

This has very important implications for relationship marketing and business-to-business practitioners, as recent research has shown that salespeople who feel fulfilled and are happy with their job tend to perform significantly better in achieving customer satisfaction and customer loyalty (Homburg and Stock, 2004).

The purpose of this study is to explore stressors that may influence salesperson emotional exhaustion and their

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perception of organizational support. To accomplish this, the current study uses conservation of resources theory to assess:

- 1 the effects of role conflict and work-family conflict on emotional exhaustion;
- 2 role conflict and role ambiguity's effects on perceived organizational support; and
- 3 whether perceived organization support is directly or indirectly linked to emotional exhaustion.

Conservation of resources theory

Conservation of resources theory has been used to examine the effects of stress and potential burnout in work-family studies (Grandey and Cropanzano, 1999) and in salesperson failure studies (Mallin and Mayo, 2006). The theory predicts that resource loss is a principal ingredient in stress (Hobfoll, 2001). In addition to predicting stress when resource loss occurs, the theory indicates that when resources are gained they can be used to compensate for previous resource losses (Hobfoll, 2001). Wright and Hobfoll (2004) claim that burnout can occur in situations where there are:

- 1 resource losses;
- 2 the potential for resource losses; and
- 3 inadequate resources to meet work demands.

When individuals have resources available; they try to protect, retain and build on those resources.

Perceived organizational support

Perceived organizational support refers to an employee's perception that the firm values his/her contributions and cares about employees' well-being (Eisenberger *et al.*, 1986). In order to meet the needs for praise and approval, and to determine the organization's readiness to reward greater effort to meet organizational goals, employees form global beliefs about the organization's commitment to them. Such beliefs form the basis for perceived organizational support, which in turn increases employees' affective organizational commitment, as well as the belief that increased effort in the job will be rewarded (Allen and Meyer, 1996).

This belief that greater effort will be acknowledged and rewarded will cause an employee to develop trust in their organization, establishing the additional belief that the organization will act in a fair manner over the long-term (Eisenberger *et al.*, 1990). In the end, when an employee has a perception of organizational support they typically will feel an obligation to reciprocate by committing to the organization (Eisenberger *et al.*, 1990). Employees may view a lack of support as the company not providing them with the adequate resources to perform their job, causing them to have to expel more of their own physical, mental and emotional resources in order to deal with the tasks at hand.

Role stress

Role stress occurs when the expectations of an individual's behavior become inconsistent (Kahn *et al.*, 1964). There are two dimensions of role stress. The first, role conflict, occurs when an employee receives two different, conflicting sets of directions from two different authority figures in a work setting. The second, role ambiguity, occurs when an employee is unclear on how to perform and/or behave in their particular job capacity (Rizzo *et al.*, 1970; Behrman and Perreault, 1984). Within the sales profession, role conflict and role ambiguity are frequent occurrences (Dubinsky *et al.*, 1986).

Increased levels of role stress can cause a salesperson to use additional resources to cope with the problem(s). This additional use of resources can cause stress and exhaustion levels to increase even further (Mallin and Mayo, 2006).

Role conflict has received attention in several sales studies (e.g. Johnson *et al.*, 2000; Jaramillo *et al.*, 2006; Miao and Evans, 2007). Behrman and Perreault (1984) found that the stress level of the employee is increased when role conflict occurs because the employee cannot follow one set of directions without ignoring, or directly violating, the other set of orders. Further, salespeople that have direct contact with customers, often experience conflicting feelings in attempting to fulfill requirements of the job (Boles *et al.*, 1997).

Role ambiguity, like role conflict, has received attention within sales research (e.g. Boles *et al.*, 2003; Jaramillo *et al.*, 2006; Miao and Evans, 2007). Walker *et al.* (1977) examined the negative effect that role ambiguity had on sales performance. Behrman and Perreault (1984) found that role ambiguity has a negative effect on satisfaction in addition to performance. More recently, Leach *et al.* (2005) examined how role ambiguity mediates the relationship between self-regulated training and performance.

While little empirical knowledge exists with regard to the relationships between the two dimensions of role stress and perceived organizational support, role stress should be negatively related to perceived organizational support. Logically, as role conflict increases for a salesperson, the salesperson will feel that the organization is not providing the needed support to perform his/her job properly. The same logic can be applied to the relationship between role ambiguity and perceived organizational support. A salesperson that does not feel s/he is receiving the proper support from their organization is likely to develop a "me first" attitude (Homburg and Stock, 2005). If the salesperson feels that his/her organization, and the actors in it, are not looking out for his/her wellbeing, it is not prudent to concern him/herself with the needs of the customer or the organization. S/he will just look out for his/her own wellbeing. When this happens, the salesperson is no longer customer and/or relationship oriented. This leads to lower levels of customer satisfaction (Longfellow, 1995). While empirical support is sparse, one study (Foley *et al.*, 2005) examines the three constructs with regard to Protestant church workers. Their findings suggest both role conflict ($-0.51, p < 0.01$) and role ambiguity ($-0.35, p < 0.01$) are negatively correlated with perceived organizational support. Based on the above evidence, the following hypotheses are proposed:

- H1. Role conflict will be negatively related to perceived organizational support.
- H2. Role ambiguity will be negatively related to perceived organizational support.

Work-family conflict

The unique nature of the sales profession causes unusually high levels of pressure as compared to other corporate positions (Dubinsky *et al.*, 1986). When a salesperson's job requirements become incompatible with his/her family responsibilities, work-family conflict occurs (Greenhaus and Beutell, 1985). Work-family conflict is defined by Kahn *et al.* (1964, p. 77) as "a form of inter-role conflict in which pressures from work and family domains become mutually

incompatible in some respect". Following conservation of resources theory, the additional resources expended by a salesperson attempting to deal with work-family conflict will not be available when needed to deal with job-related stress, both internally from actors in the organization and externally in relationships with customers (Wright and Hobfoll, 2004).

Researchers have examined work-family conflict across a variety of occupations: education (Netemeyer *et al.*, 1996), banking (Karatepe and Tekinkus, 2006), law enforcement (Burke, 1994) and sales (McKay and Tate, 1999; Boles *et al.*, 2003). While the linkage between perceived organizational support and work-family conflict has not been examined in the sales literature, Foley *et al.* (2005) found that perceived organizational support is negatively related to work-family conflict in Chinese employees in Hong Kong.

H3. Perceived organizational support will be negatively related to work-family conflict.

Emotional exhaustion

Emotional exhaustion, one of the three dimensions of burnout, is considered the core driver of the burnout construct (Maslach and Jackson, 1981; Gaines and Jerimer, 1983). Excessive psychological and emotional demands on salespeople lead to emotional exhaustion (Jackson *et al.*, 1986). In the sales profession, emotional exhaustion is a frequent occurrence (Singh *et al.*, 1994). Salespeople who experience emotional exhaustion tend to blame it on their firm (Maslach and Jackson, 1981). They become less open-minded, less driven and more apathetic (Hagen, 1989). Their orientation toward customer satisfaction and long-term relationship building suffers. This ultimately leads to the salesperson becoming more dissatisfied with their job, and eventually leaving his/her position (Singh *et al.*, 1994).

A great deal of research has examined the effect that role conflict has on emotional exhaustion (Schwab and Iwanicki, 1982; Singh *et al.*, 1994). Boles *et al.* (1997) found that a direct, positive relationship exists between role conflict and emotional exhaustion. Elloy *et al.* (2001) found the same result in their investigation of self-managed work teams. The relationship was also found in nurses (Gil-Monte *et al.*, 1993) and lawyers (Jackson *et al.*, 1987).

H4. Role conflict will be significantly related to emotional exhaustion.

Perceived organizational support differs from other types of support available in the work-family conflict arena (Foley *et al.*, 2005). Perceived organizational support consists of supportive policies developed by organizations and supervisors who keep in mind that employees have non-work obligations to which they need to attend (Thomas and Ganster, 1995). Perceived organizational support was found to have an inverse relationship with emotional exhaustion (Armstrong-Stassen *et al.*, 1998). Bakker *et al.* (2004) found that job resources such as support reduced the effects of job demands on emotional exhaustion. When salespeople work within an organization that they perceive as supportive, the effects of emotional exhaustion typically associated with boundary spanning positions are significantly reduced. Lower levels of emotional exhaustion result in salespeople that are more driven, have a more positive attitude toward and relationship with their firm, are more customer oriented and are less likely to turn over.

H5. Perceived organizational support will be negatively related to emotional exhaustion.

Giebels and Janssen (2005) found that work-family conflict was positively related to emotional exhaustion among Dutch social service workers. Foley *et al.* (2005) found the same results in their study of clergy members in Hong Kong. Gil-Monte *et al.* (1993) mirrored these results in their study of nurses. Further, within a sales force setting, Boles *et al.* (2001) found that salesperson work-family conflict significantly affects emotional exhaustion even after considering role stress. Thus, we hypothesize:

H6. Work-family conflict will be positively related to emotional exhaustion.

Methodology

Sample

In total, 188 salespeople from a national advertising firm located in the South Central USA were surveyed. Surveys were distributed at the place of employment, and were collected by one of the authors. Subjects were assured that their responses would remain confidential and management would only see the compiled results of the study. A total of 136 usable surveys were returned, for a response rate of 72 percent. The response rate is relatively high because management at the firm championed the study and requested that salespeople participated.

According to the Moncrief *et al.* (2006) taxonomy, salespeople in this study can be classified as new business/channel development sellers. The subjects were all frontline, field salespeople whose compensation was heavily based on commission and bonuses. Salespeople in the study were 72 percent male, had a median age of 30 years and had a median of 6.6 years of work experience. Seventy-three percent of respondents had a college education. The mean salary (without bonuses) of employees with the firm was just over \$32,000; and incomes ranged from \$9,600 to \$75,000 (before bonuses). According to Armstrong and Overton (1977), assessment of non-response bias is not necessary in samples that have a non-response rate under 30 percent. While all working for the same firm, the salespeople in this study were members of different work teams, worked under different managers, and worked in different territories and for different lengths of time. This helps to ensure a significant variance in the constructs.

Measures

All constructs in this study were assessed using full versions of published, well accepted scales and met the Cronbach's α requirements recommended by Nunnally (1978). Role conflict and role ambiguity were assessed using the eight-item and six-item measures ($\alpha = 0.81$ and 0.82 , respectively) developed by Rizzo *et al.* (1970). Work-family conflict was assessed using the eight-item measure ($\alpha = 0.80$) developed by Burke *et al.* (1976). Emotional exhaustion was assessed using the eight-item measure ($\alpha = 0.89$) developed as a part of Maslach and Jackson's (1981) burnout inventory. Perceived organizational support was assessed using the 16-item measure ($\alpha = 0.93$) developed by Eisenberger *et al.* (1986). Table I provides bivariate correlations and reliabilities.

Table I Correlations and reliabilities

	WFC	RA	RC	EE	POS
Work-family conflict	0.8				
Role ambiguity	0.36	0.81			
Role conflict	0.43	0.53	0.82		
Emotional exhaustion	0.52	0.43	0.58	0.89	
Perceived organizational support	-0.51	-0.57	-0.56	-0.44	0.93

Notes: All correlations are significant at the $p < 0.01$ level. Reliabilities are listed on the diagonal

Analysis and results

Data were analyzed using LISREL 8.80. A confirmatory factor analysis was conducted to ensure that the relationships between the observed and latent constructs behave as expected. The resulting measurement model had a χ^2 of 1382.24 with 976 degrees of freedom ($p = 0.00$). The model met Hu and Bentler’s (1999) criteria for good fit (SRMR = 0.07, RMSEA = 0.05, CFI = 0.96). The proposed structural model had a χ^2 of 1,608 with 982 degrees of freedom ($p = 0.00$). The structural model also met Hu and Bentler’s (1999) criteria for good fit (SRMR = 0.08; RMSEA = 0.06; CFI = 0.95).

Role conflict was found to be negatively related to perceived organizational support ($t = -2.98, p < 0.05$), providing support for *H1* (see Figure 1). This finding is consistent with previous research (Foley *et al.*, 2005). Role ambiguity also was negatively related to perceived organizational support ($t = -3.18, p < 0.05$), supporting *H2*. Perceived organizational support was negatively related to work-family conflict ($t = -4.65, p < 0.05$), supporting *H3*, while role conflict was positively related to emotional exhaustion ($t = 3.32, p < 0.05$), supporting *H4*. Both of these findings

are consistent with previous findings (Elloy *et al.*, 2001; Foley *et al.*, 2005).

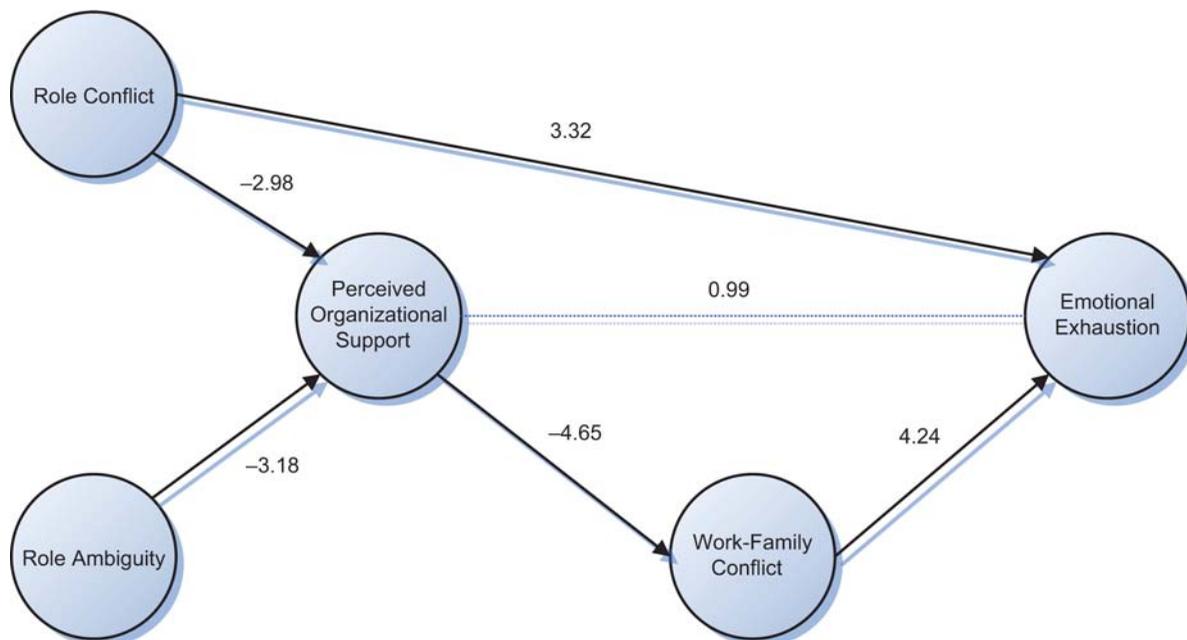
Perceived organizational support was not related directly related to emotional exhaustion ($t = 0.99, p > 0.05$), failing to support *H5*. Evidently, a supportive work environment is related to emotional exhaustion only through its relationship with work-family conflict. Other research has indicated a link between work-family conflict and emotional exhaustion, but the inter-relationships with perceptions of organizational support have not been tested with all of these constructs in a model. Finally, work-family conflict was positively related to emotional exhaustion ($t = 4.24, p > 0.05$), supporting *H6* and verifying previous research (Boles *et al.*, 1997).

Discussion

The positive relationship between work-family conflict and emotional exhaustion was expected. If a salesperson cannot satisfy the needs of his/her job without sacrificing family needs or vice versa, it is likely to create an emotionally charged situation that can be stressful and exhausting. Often, a salesperson may fail to meet the needs of both their family and their job, likely due to a lack of resources to adequately handle both situations, creating a tense and possibly deteriorating situation on both fronts (Greenhaus and Beutell, 1985). Problems with meeting demands of work affect performance at work, causing the salesperson to become detached, less driven and less concerned for customers and their needs. This will reflect in decreased productivity. Decreased productivity on the job will create an entirely different category of stressors. The salesperson already lacks the adequate cognitive and physical resources to deal with their existing stress. Additional stress can begin to influence his/her family life.

The relationships between the role stress variables and other model constructs were basically as expected. Role

Figure 1 The results



Note: Values listed in the model are t values

conflict was negatively related to perceived organizational support. When a salesperson receives two conflicting sets of orders, this creates tension in the workplace. No matter which choice is made, one set of orders will not be followed, and the salesperson will have to deal with the fallout. A salesperson may feel an organization that puts them in a position where they experience high levels of role conflict has no concern for their well being and does not value the contributions they make to the firm. This likely will result in a decrease in perceived organizational support. Also, role conflict can occur when a salesperson receives conflicting directions from an internal source, for example the sales manager, and an external source, for example the customer (Weitz *et al.*, 2007). The salesperson must decide which set of directions to follow. While ignoring the customer can result in loss of an account, ignoring the internal firm directions can result in a loss of employment. This can directly affect customer satisfaction and loyalty.

Role ambiguity also was found to be negatively related to perceived organizational support. Employees who are unclear about their job responsibilities and/or their role within the firm may feel that the organization does not appreciate them. Salespeople may feel that if the organization did value them, it would make more of an effort to clarify their job and role responsibilities. Some of a salesperson's duties involve doing things for their clients. If a salesperson is unsure exactly what their responsibilities are, both internal and external, they may not live up to customer expectations, injuring that client's relationship with both the salesperson and the firm.

Perceived organizational support is negatively related to work-family conflict. Salespeople working for organizations with an understanding that employees have an outside family life should experience less conflict between work and home domains. These types of firms develop policies and procedures such that an employee's family will not always be "second" to work. These firms will also tend to hire and train managers that are more attentive to employees needs to manage their home life as well as their work responsibilities. If an employee feels happy at home, and feels like they have sufficient resources to devote to family responsibilities without taking away from their job performance, this will result in a more driven employee who is better able to perform the duties they are tasked with in their job role. This will result in customers receiving better service and getting their demands met in a timely and efficient manner, strengthening a firm's overall relationships with their clients.

Interestingly, perceived organizational support has no direct relationship on emotional exhaustion. It is possible that salespeople view their job and the organization for which they work as two separate entities. Even if a salesperson feels that their firm is supportive, there are still many aspects of their job that are separate from the firm, such as customers and competing salespeople. A salesperson could feel that even though their organization is supportive, the nature of their job is still stressful and tense. So, while the salesperson is thankful for his firm's attempts to decrease the amount of conflict encountered, the potential for some level of emotional exhaustion is always present.

The insight that can be gleaned from these results is that in order for sales forces to adequately reduce and/or eliminate emotional exhaustion, firms must be proactive. Companies cannot wait until they see signs of emotional exhaustion influencing their sales force because it may already be too late

– the damage may have been done. Failure to be proactive can result in reduced levels of responsiveness to customer needs, lowering the customer base's perception of the firm's overall service quality. Firms must expect that emotional exhaustion will become an issue, and should do things to prevent it, rather than deal with it once it has already permeated the sales force.

Additionally, the finding that perceived organizational support does not affect emotional exhaustion ties directly into this line of thought. Firms must recognize that it is not just corporate culture and/or company regulations/practices that can influence emotional exhaustion. The nature of the sales position inherently leads to a great deal of emotional exhaustion. Firms that intend to be proactive should consider how one can prevent emotional exhaustion that is caused by the job as well as the company. A major problem here may be when salespeople with previous experience are hired. Even though the salesperson is now at a new firm, and can leave all the old triggers to emotional exhaustion caused by their old firm behind, the triggers inherent in a sales position may still have influence. This can cause the salesperson to feel that they cannot escape their exhausted state, driving them even further into lethargy.

Managerial implications

This research provides evidence to organizations that there are proactive methods to deal with salesperson burnout and other negative issues such as sales force turnover. Most of the relationships in the structural model have been examined before on an individual level or as part of other, larger models. However, there have been very few attempts in research to integrate all three types of conflict prevalent in the sales profession with both negative and positive job outcomes.

The finding that perceived organizational support has no effect on reducing emotional exhaustion is important. As discussed earlier, salespeople may feel that no matter how supportive a firm may be, there is still going to be emotional exhaustion associated with a sales job. It is inherent in the nature of the task. This is important for managers because firms need to not only rely on the approach that emotional exhaustion can be decreased or eliminated by taking actions that increase an employee's perception of the support they get from their organization. Firms and the sales managers within them need to start taking the approach that emotional exhaustion is going to exist to some degree in a sales job. Instead of taking proactive steps to eliminate or reduce emotional exhaustion, the firm is better served to focus on reactive steps that help employees cope with emotional exhaustion. Allowing salespeople to change territories and/or client bases from time to time can help reduce the monotony associated with any job. Training employees to work smarter instead of harder will put less of a strain on their physical and cognitive resources. Another possible approach, blasphemous as it may sound, might be to require every sales person to take a long weekend off every month, to allow time for the batteries to recharge.

Management should foster an environment of open communication among sales managers and between sales managers and salespeople. Many sales forces tend to have environments of secrecy, uncertainty and interpersonal conflict (Dubinsky *et al.* 1986, Jackson *et al.* 2006). Creating an environment in which the sales force interacts

and works as a whole, i.e. members of the same team, will likely result in much lower levels of role conflict than the traditional culture with separate camps and clicks that most sales forces tend to gravitate toward.

There also needs to be some kind of regular, formally structured meeting so everyone can be on the same page concerning who has what duties and responsibilities, discuss and resolve issues that arrive when members of the sales force receive two conflicting sets of directions from two different sources of authority, as well as give both salespeople and sales managers an opportunity to air any concerns in an open forum. While this may seem like obvious advice, the high levels of both role conflict and role ambiguity found in most industrial sales jobs (Behrman and Perreault, 1984; Skinner and Kelley, 2006) would indicate that this advice is not being heeded. Skinner and Kelley (2006) find that, while largely ignored by sales forces, open and positive communication has been successful in bringing about change of this type in other business disciplines and functions.

The sales organization needs to create official company materials that explain both the responsibilities of each job and what is expected by the organization in terms of behavior and performance. Allowing potential new hires to ride with current salespeople and/or provide some form of realistic job preview is one way to make sure that new hires understand the tradeoffs between work and home that are required. It also may help to develop increased role clarity among these salespeople. Taking these steps may create a more uniform culture, formalized expectations and clearly understood job responsibilities; decreasing the amount of ambiguity salespeople experience in the workplace. Flaherty *et al.* (1999) found that when employees have a clear understanding of what their responsibilities and/or orders of action are, they exhaust significantly less of their cognitive resources trying to interpret and decipher exactly what they are supposed to be doing and for whom, and spend more time focusing on fulfilling their role responsibilities and assigned tasks. This ties directly into conservation of resources theory.

The firm should take steps to allow salespeople some flexibility to handle their family responsibilities along with the responsibilities associated with their job. This can be done through the use of flexi-time in scheduling and call quotas, as well as rotating travel schedules and/or telecommuting with both clients and firm personnel. Allowing salespeople to work from home on occasion may cut down on work-family conflict by allowing salespeople to handle responsibilities on both fronts simultaneously. Regardless of the approach taken, it is important for firms to let salespeople, and other employees, know that their family is also important and that the firm understands the importance of non-work issues.

The adoption of such policies has the potential to significantly increase an employee's overall satisfaction by increasing some or all of the seven facets of satisfaction. Work-family conflict lowers an employees' satisfaction with their supervisor and company policies (Boles *et al.*, 2003); role ambiguity negatively affects satisfaction with promotion opportunities; and role conflict negatively impacts satisfaction with company policies. In addition, perceived organizational support has been shown to increase satisfaction (Foley *et al.*, 2005), while emotional exhaustion is negatively related to satisfaction (Babakus *et al.*, 1999).

This research is useful because the job outcome variables included in the model have been linked directly to turnover in

several research studies. Perceived organizational support has been shown to be negatively related to turnover (Bishop *et al.*, 2000) and positively linked to organizational commitment (Whitener, 2001). The inverse results have been found for emotional exhaustion (Fogerty *et al.*, 2000) and work-family conflict (Boyar *et al.*, 2003). This ties directly into a firm's ability to establish and maintain mutually-beneficial, long-term relationships with their customers. When a sales force has a high degree of turnover, it is a competitive disadvantage because the firm will experience both an increase in hiring and training costs; as well as a decrease in levels of customer service, because it will take new salespeople time to get up to speed concerning product/service knowledge and the development of the skills necessary to efficiently and effectively sell products/services in their particular category (Stan *et al.*, 2004).

Limitations and future research

This research, like all research, has some limitations. The first issue encountered was that this study only examined results from the perspective of the salesperson. With additional insight from sales managers, more information can be obtained as to how the relationship between conflict/stress variables and both positive and negative job outcomes manifest themselves. These relational dyads would allow researchers to search for gaps in congruence across the constructs and relationships presented in this study.

Generalizability may also be an issue, due to the fact that only one firm was used in the data collection. The salespeople in this study worked in the South Central USA. Additional research on sales forces in other areas of the country would strengthen claims of generalizability. The company used in the study was an outdoor advertising company that sold what can be considered a hybrid product/service. Further research is needed to determine whether these effects carry over when dealing only with products or services.

This study also opens some avenues for future research. Researchers should investigate what happens beyond the presented model. How does the model affect the seven facets of job satisfaction? While research has shown that the negative and positive job outcome variables presented in the model are related to organizational commitment and turnover intentions as part of larger models, further research is needed to determine how they are affected by the model presented in this research.

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Appendix. Item description summary

Work-family conflict (eight items)

How does your current job impact on:

- 1 Personal relationships with friends.
- 2 Your mental and physical state at home.
- 3 Your participation in home activities.
- 4 Your weekend, vacation time and social life.
- 5 Concern for your health and safety.
- 6 Your personal development.
- 7 Pressure for model behavior in the community.
- 8 Requirement to relocate for the sake of your career?

Role conflict (8 items)

- 1 I receive an assignment without adequate resources and materials to execute it.
- 2 I work with two or more groups who operate quite differently.
- 3 I work on unnecessary things.
- 4 I have to buck a rule or policy in order to carry out an assignment.
- 5 I receive incompatible requests from two or more people.
- 6 I have to do things which should be done differently.
- 7 I do things that are apt to be accepted by one person and not accepted by others.
- 8 I receive an assignment without the manpower to complete it.

Role ambiguity (six items)

- 1 My job has clear, planned goals and objectives (R).
- 2 I know that I have divided my time properly (R).
- 3 I know what my responsibilities are (R).
- 4 I know exactly what is expected of me (R).
- 5 I feel certain about how much authority I have (R).
- 6 Explanation of what has to be done is clear (R).

Emotional exhaustion (eight items)

- 1 I feel emotionally drained from my work.
- 2 I feel used up at the end of the work day.
- 3 I feel fatigued when I wake up in the morning and have to face another day on the job.
- 4 I feel burned out from my work.
- 5 I feel very energetic.
- 6 I feel frustrated by my job.
- 7 I feel I'm working too hard on my job.
- 8 I feel like I'm at the end of my rope.

Perceived organizational support (16 items)

- 1 The organization values my contribution to its wellbeing.
- 2 If the organization could hire someone to replace me at a lower salary it would do so (R).
- 3 The organization fails to appreciate any extra effort from me (R).
- 4 The organization strongly considers my goals and values.
- 5 The organization would ignore any complaint from me (R).
- 6 The organization disregards my best interests when it makes decisions that affect me (R).
- 7 Help is available from the organization when I have a problem.
- 8 The organization cares about my wellbeing.
- 9 Even if I did the best job possible, the organization would fail to notice (R).
- 10 The organization is willing to help me when I need a special favor.
- 11 The organization cares about my general satisfaction at work.
- 12 If given the opportunity, the organization would take advantage of me (R).
- 13 The organization shows very little concern for me (R).
- 14 The organization cares about my opinions.
- 15 The organization takes pride in my accomplishments at work.
- 16 The organization tries to make my job as interesting as possible.

Note: Items marked "(R)" were reverse coded.

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Executive summary and implications for managers and executives

This summary has been provided to allow managers and executives a rapid appreciation of the content of the article. Those with a particular interest in the topic covered may then read the article in toto to take advantage of the more comprehensive description of the research undertaken and its results to get the full benefit of the material present.

It might be stating the obvious to say that members of a sales team are more effective if they are content in their work, sure of organizational support, not subject to contradictory instructions from different managers, and are able to balance the conflicting demands of home and family life. We'd all be happier in our work if that were the case.

If such a Utopia means better bottom-line results from energized and focused sales people, organizations need to find ways of achieving the conditions that lead there. Allowing salespeople to change territories and/or client bases from time to time can help reduce the monotony associated with any job. Training employees to work smarter instead of harder will put less strain on their physical and cognitive resources and – here comes the bit that's likely to sound blasphemous to employers – another possible approach is to give every salesperson a long weekend off every month to allow time for the batteries to recharge.

In a study of frontline salespeople whose compensation is heavily based on commission, Alex Hamwi *et al.* explore stressors that may influence emotional exhaustion and the perception of organizational support. To accomplish this, they use conservation of resources theory to assess:

- 1 the effects of role conflict and work-family conflict on emotional exhaustion;
- 2 role conflict and role ambiguity's effects on perceived organizational support; and
- 3 whether perceived organization support is directly or indirectly linked to emotional exhaustion.

They recommend that in order for sales forces to adequately reduce and/or eliminate emotional exhaustion, firms must be proactive. Companies cannot wait until they see signs of emotional exhaustion influencing their sales force because it may be too late; the damage may have been done. Failure to be proactive can result in reduced levels of responsiveness to customer needs, lowering the customer base's perception of the firm's overall service quality. Firms must expect that emotional exhaustion will become an issue, and should do things to prevent it, rather than deal with it once it has already permeated the sales force.

Firms must recognize that it is not just corporate culture and/or company regulations/practices that can influence emotional exhaustion. The nature of the sales position inherently leads to a great deal of emotional exhaustion. Firms that intend to be proactive should consider how one can prevent emotional exhaustion that is caused by the job as well as the company. A major problem may be when salespeople with previous experience are hired. Even though the salesperson is now at a new firm, and can leave all the old triggers to emotional exhaustion caused by their old firm behind, the triggers inherent in a sales position may still have influence. This can cause the salesperson to feel that they

cannot escape their exhausted state, driving them even further into lethargy.

Firms and their sales managers need to start taking the approach that emotional exhaustion is going to exist to some degree in a sales job. The firm should focus on steps that help employees cope with it – hence the recommendations for changing territories and/or client bases, working smarter instead of harder, and having a long weekend break.

Management should foster an environment of open communication among sales managers and between sales managers and salespeople. Many sales forces tend to have environments of secrecy, uncertainty and interpersonal conflict. Creating an environment in which the sales force interacts and works as a whole (i.e. as members of the same team) is likely result in much lower levels of role conflict than the traditional culture with separate camps and cliques that most sales forces tend to gravitate toward.

There also needs to be some kind of regular, formally structured meeting so everyone can be on the same page concerning who has what duties and responsibilities, discuss and resolve issues that arrive when members of the sales force

receive two conflicting sets of directions from two different sources of authority, as well as give both salespeople and sales managers an opportunity to air any concerns in an open forum.

The sales organization needs to create official company materials that explain both the responsibilities of each job and what is expected by the organization in terms of behavior and performance. Allowing potential new hires to ride with current salespeople and/or provide some form of realistic job preview is one way to make sure that new hires understand the tradeoffs between work and home that are required. It also may help to develop increased role clarity among these salespeople. Taking these steps may create a more uniform culture, formalized expectations and clearly understood job responsibilities; decreasing the amount of ambiguity salespeople experience in the workplace.

(A précis of the article “Reducing emotional exhaustion and increasing organizational support”. Supplied by Marketing Consultants for Emerald.)