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Examining the impact of job embeddedness on salesperson deviance: The moderating role of job satisfaction

Mahmoud A. Darrat Assistant Professor of Marketing^a,
 Douglas A. Amyx Burton Risinger Endowed Professor, Associate Professor of Marketing^{b,*},
 Rebecca J. Bennett Professor of Management^c

^a Department of Marketing, College of Business, Auburn University Montgomery, United States

^b Department of Marketing and Analysis, College of Business, Louisiana Tech University, United States

^c Management Department, College of Business Administration, University of Central Florida, United States

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the dysfunctional outcomes of salesperson job embeddedness as moderated by job satisfaction. Our findings suggest that among salespeople with low job satisfaction, organizational job embeddedness is positively linked with organizational deviance, interpersonal deviance, and customer-directed deviance. However, among salespeople with high job satisfaction, job embeddedness is negatively linked with organizational deviance and not significantly linked with either interpersonal or customer-directed deviance. The managerial implications of this study suggest that sales managers should be proactive in mitigating salesperson deviance behaviors through a variety of methods that may enhance salesperson satisfaction, particularly among salespeople who are embedded. Such managerial methods may include the following: 1) more assertive communication of acceptable norms with salespeople, 2) proper mentoring, 3) developing coordinated monitor and control systems, and 4) setting appropriate expectations for new hire salespeople by providing realistic job previews.

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"It may still not be true for all knowledge workers that the organization needs them more than they need the organization. But for most of them, it is a symbiotic relationship in which the two need each other in equal measure." (Drucker, 2008, p. 202)

1. Introduction

Effective salespeople represent a valuable asset to organizations due to their extensive product knowledge and ability to convert that knowledge into profitable customer relationships. Therefore, it is not surprising that marketing managers are increasingly concerned with drivers of salesperson commitment (DeConinck, 2011; Richardson, 1999). One such phenomenon that taps into why salespeople remain with their organization is job embeddedness. Job embeddedness refers to an anti-withdrawal work state whereby employees become forcibly entangled in an occupational web that makes it undesirable for them to leave the organization (Mitchell, Holtom, Lee, Sablynski, & Erez, 2001). Interestingly, research demonstrates that job embeddedness is a stronger predictor of behavioral outcomes than organizational

commitment (Holtom & Inderrieden, 2006). Whereas commitment stems from a sense of obligation to the organization, job embeddedness describes a situational circumstance where the benefits of leaving are exceeded by the switching costs. These switching costs include: 1) professional/social bonds made within the organization or community 2) perceived congruence with work/non-work environments, and 3) perceived sacrifices that will be made upon leaving the organization. Given the relatively high turnover rate in the sales industry (Richardson, 1999), it is conceivable that some salespeople who remain on the job may do so because of constraints that render them unable to leave. If this is the case, what are the behavioral ramifications of being "stuck with a job?" That is, could there be a 'dark side' to salespeople being stuck on the job? For instance, production deviance, a form of organizational deviance whereby salespeople drain company resources by shirking or avoiding job duties and responsibilities is less detectable than sabotage or theft. Similarly, salespeople may report "working from home" but not do much work at all, neglect supervisor instructions, withhold effort on the job, or even infringe on a co-worker's territory. Do salespeople who are embedded or "stuck" react by engaging in such behaviors whether those behaviors are directed at their organization, other co-workers, or their customers (or even all three entities)? Conversely, what prompts other embedded salespeople to respond more constructively to job embeddedness?

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: mdarrat@aum.edu (M.A. Darrat), damyx@latech.edu (D.A. Amyx), rebecca.bennett@ucf.edu (R.J. Bennett).

Thus, the purpose of this study is to examine the impact of occupational factors on salesperson deviance. So far, the effect of job embeddedness on deviant or counterproductive employee behavior has been mixed and unclear. One stream of research suggests that job embeddedness acts as a deterrent to workplace deviance (Avey, Keke, & Holley, 2015; Crossley, Bennett, Jex, & Burnfield, 2007; Holtom, Burton, & Crossley, 2012). That is, embedded employees feel a sense of obligation to their organizations (or in some cases fear of reprisal) and are less likely to violate organizational norms as a result.

On the other hand, conflicting research suggests that job embeddedness is not always beneficial and may actually increase the prevalence of counterproductive behaviors (Marasi, Cox, & Bennett, 2016). In view of this complexity, we assert that job satisfaction should be explored in the relationship. Specifically, we believe that one's job satisfaction may interact with or moderate the embeddedness-workplace deviance relationship. Put differently, the conversion of job embeddedness into workplace deviance should be regulated by how content salespeople are with their jobs. Whereas salespeople that are happily 'stuck' may be less likely to engage in behaviors that jeopardize their employment; their counterparts may be more likely to do so. As such, we offer a study that provides empirical, theoretical, and managerial implications to further illuminate the role of job satisfaction as further explanation to the influence of job embeddedness on employee deviant behaviors.

2. Theoretical framework and hypotheses

2.1. Organizational job embeddedness

With the rising costs of turnover spreading rapidly across industries, a growing body of research has focused on the impact of job embeddedness in controlling voluntary turnover (Crossley et al., 2007; Holtom, Mitchell, & Lee, 2006; Lee, Mitchell, Sablinski, Burton, & Holtom, 2004). Voluntary turnover is strikingly higher in the sales industry with turnover rates consistently doubling the national average in comparable industries (Richardson, 1999). Job embeddedness consists of two dimensions: organizational embeddedness and community embeddedness (Mitchell et al., 2001). Organizational job embeddedness (OJE) refers to the accumulated affective and non-affective job related constraints (links, fit, and sacrifice) which enmesh employees in a specific job within a specific organization (Harris, Wheeler, & Kacmar, 2011). Community embeddedness represents the collective forces that are extrinsic to the organization and its affiliates that bind employees to the job (social ties in the community, relocation anxieties, and family pressures to remain). Previous research indicates, however, that OJE has a higher predictive ability as related to work attitudes and behaviors (Lee et al., 2004; Mitchell et al., 2001; Thau, Crossley, Bennett, & Sczesny, 2007). Accordingly, the scope of this research is focused on job embeddedness with respect to the organization. Embedded salespeople may feel compelled to remain on the job due to personal links with the organization and/or its members (managers, co-workers, customers), feelings of compatibility between skills and the particular sales job, or to protect resources/relationships which may be forfeited by leaving the job (established rapport with clients, sales perks and incentives, personal status and reputation within the organization). Hence, OJE may be one way to minimize the high rate of voluntary turnover among sales personnel.

Inductive reasoning would suggest that if salespeople are vulnerably attached to a job because of financial or social obligations, it would be in their best interest to avoid behaviors that may endanger their employment status. In support of this concept, research indicates that highly embedded employees report significantly less organizational deviance behaviors such as volitional absences (Lee et al., 2004). Other studies suggest that employees experiencing higher job embeddedness are less likely to engage in counterproductive behaviors at work even when confronted with organizational shocks (Holtom et al., 2012).

Similarly, Thau et al. (2007) propose that social bonds of attachment developed by employees with their organizations may act as a deterrent against harmful *anti-social* work behaviors. By the same token, those with weaker organizational bonds may be less restrained when it comes to breaking the rules. Hence the advantages of job embeddedness include the reduction in employee deviance behaviors as well as a reduction in voluntary turnover which is a substantial cost to organizations. On the other hand, there may also be disadvantages associated with employee job embeddedness. Namely, feeling "stuck" may result in reactance against the source of external control. Reactance theory (Brehm, 1966; Wortman & Brehm, 1975) suggests that individuals will react against the feeling of being controlled, be that by other individuals or by circumstances (e.g. inability to transfer one's pension/job skills to a new job). Individuals experiencing such feelings of control engage in greater amounts of reactionary behavior (Allen & Greenberger, 1980; Bennett, 1998; Lawrence & Robinson, 2007), in effect "acting out" against the perceived control. The target may be the perceived agent of control, or it may be displaced aggression such as Allen and Greenberger's observation of greater graffiti and sabotage among public housing residents who perceived that their choices to be largely controlled by others. Such behaviors may be especially harmful when "low risk" targets include co-workers and/or customers. According to displaced aggression theory, employees often take an indiscriminate retaliation approach when confronted with a negative work situation (Dollard, Miller, Doob, Mowrer, & Sears, 1939). That is, aggressive behaviors are not always reciprocal and can be randomly displaced onto others who are not directly involved in the situation (e.g. coworkers, customers). For example, salespeople may redirect aggression onto co-workers since shared membership within the organization and a common workspace makes one's associates a convenient target. Moreover, overt organizational harm poses a substantially higher risk to job security than more inconspicuous anti-normative work behaviors such as harassing co-workers or taking advantage of customers (Thau et al., 2007).

2.2. Workplace deviance behaviors

In the current study, we examine how job embeddedness influences workplace deviance behaviors among salespeople. Within the marketing literature, deviance has been increasingly studied. Within recent years, a growing body of marketing research has examined the antecedents and consequences of salesperson deviance (Choi, Dixon, & Jung, 2004; Darrat, Amyx, & Bennett, 2010; Harris & Ogbonna, 2002; Jelinek & Ahearne, 2006, 2010; Yoo & Frankwick, 2013). Salesperson deviance refers to voluntary frontline behaviors that violate organizational norms and are opportunistically directed at the organization, its members, or external constituents (Darrat et al., 2010). In contrast to traditional deviance measures, salesperson deviance captures frontline behaviors that are specific to the boundary spanning role. Counterproductive workplace behaviors such as stealing from work or sexual harassment of coworkers or customers are estimated to cost employers billions of dollars annually (Levinson, 2010; Taylor, 2007). Since sales work is often solitary, deviance may be more likely to occur. Specifically, industrial salespeople spend a considerable amount of time outside of the office generating leads, developing prospects, and managing client relationships, all of which may lead to more workplace deviance behavior opportunities.

Over the past several decades, the management literature investigating the precursors and outcomes of workplace deviance has grown (Berry, Ones, & Sackett, 2007; Bolin & Heatherly, 2001; Breugh, 1981; Dalal, 2005; Skarlicki & Folger, 1997). The heightened research concern is consistent with projections which estimate that deviant employee practices such as theft and fraud cost businesses around \$50 billion a year (Coffin, 2003). Workplace deviance refers to intentional employee behaviors which violate organizational norms and, in so doing, threaten the wellbeing of the organization or its members (Robinson & Bennett,

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