



# Perceived barriers to career advancement and organizational commitment in sales<sup>☆</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

This paper identifies three potential barriers to career advancement in sales: being excluded from informal networks, a lack of cultural fit, and a lack of mentoring. Using a sample of 241 account executives and managers from an organization in the television broadcasting industry, study results suggest that perceived barriers to career advancement (PBCA) have a significant negative impact on the organizational commitment (OC) of these sales employees. Effects are estimated with path analysis, and the effects of common method bias and job satisfaction are considered. Demographic variables (age, gender, company tenure, job level) are also hypothesized to moderate the relationship between PBCA and OC. The negative influence of PBCA on OC is found to become stronger as company tenure increases. Data also suggest that the negative relationship between PBCA and OC is more powerful among account executives than sales managers/directors. Managerial and research implications are discussed.

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## 1. Introduction

Examination of career advancement opportunities can provide insights into a variety of career patterns and paths. Typically, studies of career management focus on traditional careers (e.g., King, 2004), but the subject is also pertinent to professionals who might occupy boundary spanning positions such as salespeople. Research recognizes that individuals are attracted to these kinds of jobs because they provide enhanced career advancement opportunities. Boone and Milewicz (1989, p.42) report that university graduates who apply for sales jobs usually believe that “an entry position in sales is the fast track to advancement.” Johnston and Marshall (2009, p.42) echo this and give several examples of recently appointed CEO’s that moved “up through the sales ranks into the executive suite.” On the other hand, if individuals feel that unfair barriers are impeding their career advancement, it can result in poor productivity and increased turnover costs for their organization (Ragins, Townsend, & Mattis, 1998). These outcomes have commonly been associated with low levels of organizational commitment in personal selling contexts (Jaramillo, Mulki, & Marshall, 2005; Schwepker, 2001).

This study describes a set of perceived barriers to career advancement applicable to salespeople. Using a survey of sales

managers and account executives, the influence of perceived barriers on organizational commitment is analyzed. To better establish boundary conditions, four individual employee characteristics are evaluated as potential moderators of the relationship between perceived barriers and organizational commitment: age, gender, tenure, and job level. The conceptual model is illustrated in Fig. 1. The next section discusses background research on sales employees’ perceptions of barriers to their career advancement.

## 2. Theoretical background and hypotheses

### 2.1. Perceived barriers to career advancement

Tokenism theory is used to identify factors that contribute to an employee’s perception that he/she is facing unfair barriers to their career advancement (Kanter, 1977). The theory suggests that some employees see themselves as encapsulated and separated from a more dominant group of employees. These employees believe that they are under more pressure than others and have to work harder than their dominant colleagues to receive recognition (e.g., Comer, Nichols, & Vermillion, 1998; Gustafson, 2008). At least three barriers to career advancement are identified by tokenism theory that can be applied to the sales industry: 1) exclusion from informal company networks, 2) lack of culture fit, and 3) lack of mentoring (Lyness & Thompson, 2000).

#### 2.1.1. Informal company networks

Researchers have recognized that successful employees rely on company networks that they continually develop over time. Employee networking is associated with better pay, job mobility, higher

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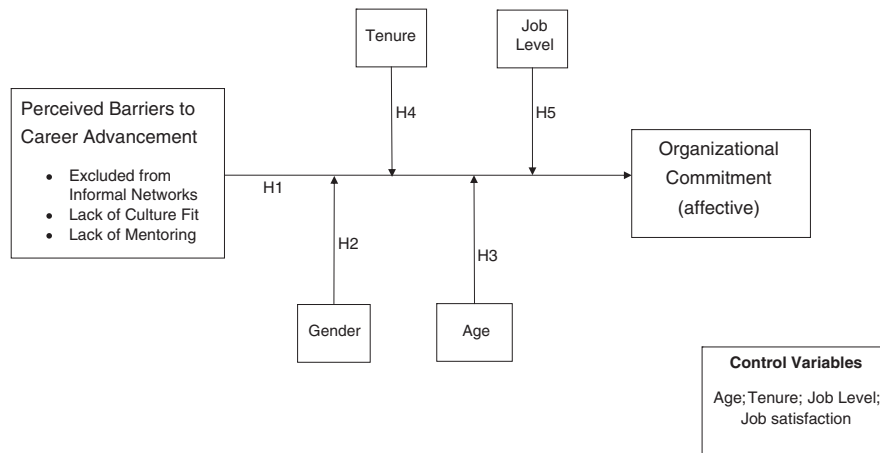


Fig. 1. Conceptual model.

performance evaluations, and career advancement (e.g., Cross & Thomas, 2008). Company networks are often classified as formal or informal. Although both network types can help employees' achieve higher performance, research shows that top performing employees are those who recognize and rely on the power of informal company networks (Armstrong, 2003; Cross & Thomas, 2008). These kinds of networks help employees recognize how collaborative work is actually occurring and how company resources and power are distributed. Informal networks are more adaptive and can move diagonally or elliptically through the organizational chart to get work done (Krackhardt & Hanson, 1994). Further, Ragins et al. (1998) find that eighty-five percent of women executives consider networking with influential colleagues to be an important strategy for breaking the glass ceiling. This suggests that employees who believe they are excluded from these informal networks will perceive it as a barrier to their career advancement.

### 2.1.2. Culture fit

A common theme regarding the underlying theories of fit is that they share an interest in the role of both person and situation in contributing to behavior, and that they suggest correspondence or fit between individuals and their environments yields positive psychological consequences (Ehrhart, 2006; Lopez, Babin, & Chung, 2009). Difficulties attributable to a perceived lack of culture fit can be explained by reasoning from social identity theory (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; O'Reilly, Chatman, & Caldwell, 1991). Employees evaluate their membership in social groups that coexist in an organization. When characteristics of employees are atypical compared to a majority of others, they assume the role of out-group members rather than in-group members (Lopez & McMillan-Capehart, 2002). The out-group employees experience a lack of fit to the organizational culture. In-groups and out-groups compete over power and organizational resources, and regularly in-groups win this struggle while out-groups are left out (Lopez & McMillan-Capehart, 2002). In addition, in-group members impose additional performance pressures on members of the out-group, making it more difficult for them to succeed in the work environment (Comer et al., 1998). Thus, when employees don't feel that they fit with the culture of their organization, it may also be perceived as a barrier to their career advancement.

### 2.1.3. Mentoring

There is compelling evidence to suggest that mentoring can have a profound impact on employees. Fine and Pullins (1998) describe a variety of benefits from mentoring, including exposure and visibility, protection, confirmation, counseling, and friendship. Sales scholars have defined mentoring as "a career-oriented relationship between a

more senior salesperson or manager (mentor) and a junior or newly hired salesperson (protégé) initiated for the development of the protégé's understanding of his or her roles, the social and political nature of the organization, and the advancement of the protégé's career" (Brashear, Bellenger, Boles, & Barskdale, 2006, p. 8). Mentors are viewed by employees as being capable of pulling them along in their quest for upward mobility (Comer et al., 1998), so individuals lacking mentoring can be at a significant disadvantage when it comes to their career progress (Richard, Taylor, Barnett, & Nesbit, 2002). Thus, a lack of mentoring is likely to be perceived as a barrier to one's career advancement.

### 2.2. Perceived barriers to career advancement and organizational commitment

Organizational commitment may be described as an attitude that reflects the "strength of an individual's identification with and involvement in a particular organization" (Mowday, Steers, and Porter, 1979, p. 226). This definition specifically captures the affective dimension of organizational commitment. Several antecedents to this type of commitment have been examined, including personal characteristics (i.e., age, gender, etc.), job characteristics (i.e., scope, variety, etc.), organizational characteristics (size, centralization), and group/leader relations (Mathieu & Zajac, 1990). In the context of personal selling, organizational commitment is an especially important outcome, since the positive relationship between organizational commitment and performance has been found to be stronger for sales employees than for nonsales employees (Jaramillo et al., 2005).

Rousseau (1990) demonstrated that career advancement is a key aspect of an employee's psychological contract with his/her organization. Psychological contracts simply entail employees' beliefs regarding reciprocal obligations involving their companies (Rousseau, 1989). When employees work hard, they expect that advancement opportunities will be made available to them. When individuals perceive there to be barriers within the organization that would hinder their advancement in spite of their efforts, the psychological contract is violated. Issues related to career advancement have been found to be the most popular sources of breaches to psychological contracts (Hamel, 2009; Kickul, 2001). Since psychological contracts are unwritten, breaches to these contracts are generally perceptual. Whether or not these perceptions are accurate, past research suggests that contract breaches are negatively associated with job attitudes (Kickul, 2001; Robinson & Rousseau, 1994). Thus, it is hypothesized:

**H1.** Perceived barriers to career advancement are negatively related to sales employee's organizational commitment.

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