Psychological Capital Intervention: A Potential Tool for Improving Organizational Commitment in Sales Organizations

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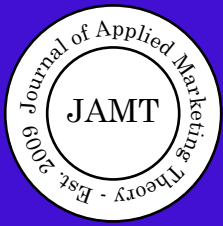
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ABSTRACT

Given current challenges related to talent in sales organizations, the need for enhanced recruiting and retention of top-tier talent has never been more critical. Extant research has demonstrated the high cost of employee turnover and the importance of organizational commitment for the sales force. This report explores the potential of utilizing psychological capital (PsyCap) in sales organizations in order to gain a competitive advantage through increased organizational commitment. The authors found strong, positive relationships between PsyCap and organizational support, job satisfaction, and organizational commitment. Implications for academic researchers and a proposed intervention strategy for managers seeking to improve organizational commitment are included with this report.

INTRODUCTION

Companies face important challenges with respect to developing successful sales organizations and employee turnover is an enormous problem for many sales organizations (Cascio, 2006; Boles et al., 2012). Sales executives are constantly looking for ways to recruit and retain their best talent. Steenburgh and Ahearne (2012) reported that many organizations constantly adjust incentive plans for their sales team, but most have had limited success with respect to sales force retention and performance. What does it take to develop and retain a sales force in the 21st century? In a response to the call for research on the intra-organizational resources necessary to enhance sales performance by Evans et al. (2012), this article explores positive psychological capital as a means of enhancing the organizational commitment for members of a sales force.

The ability to create a sustainable competitive advantage has become increasingly challenging due to global competition and advances in technology. Historically, academic researchers and practitioners have explored the concept of competitive advantage from numerous points of view. Common themes in the academic literature include creating competitive advantage through economic power, technological supremacy, patent protection, copyright protection, and government regulation. More recently, technological change and new product innovation with rapid diffusion in the marketplace have changed the rules for creating and maintaining a competitive advantage. Although speed-to-

market, marketing orientation, and mass customization have changed the overall competitive landscape; economic capital, technological capital, social capital, and human capital remain strong sources of competitive advantage. Luthans et al. (2004) provide a framework for extending research on human capital to positive psychological capital in order to create a sustainable competitive advantage. Their model includes economic capital (what you have), human capital (what you know), social capital (who you know), and positive psychological capital (who you are). In particular, their research provides a new scale for assessing psychological capital in an organizational setting.

Building on the work of Luthans et al. (2004), the overall objective of this paper is to explore the potential for sales managers to retain key members of their sales force. Workman, Homburg, and Jensen (2003) reported the importance of salespeople having the ability to obtain the support of others in their firm in order to be successful and psychological capital becomes the lens used to identify the appropriate organizational support necessary to produce short- and long-term sales performance. We explore the relationships between psychological capital and perceived organizational support, job satisfaction, and organizational commitment. While psychological capital has been studied in numerous workplace settings, we believe that this is the initial attempt to evaluate psychological capital and propose an intervention strategy in a sales environment. A proposed framework for developing PsyCap among members of the sales force is proposed at the end of the report.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND OF PSYCAP

Research on positive psychology developed when Seligman (2002) challenged academic researchers and practitioners to move from a preoccupation of what is wrong or dysfunctional with people to what is right and good about them. Specifically, positive psychology focuses on the strengths of an individual rather than the weaknesses and the question for mangers is how do we develop psychological capital in our organization? Seligman (2002) answered this question by suggesting that in the workplace, the "flow" of psychological capital occurs when personal and organization goals are aligned in the short- and long-run. Research by Smith and Rutigliano (2003) utilized the concept of psychological capital to develop a new approach to enhance the selection and development of a sales force by aligning company goals with the innate abilities of individuals on the sales team rather than focusing on weaknesses. Luthans et al. (2004) outlined four areas of emphasis that can be used to develop positive organizational behavior. These four areas include hope (Snyder et al., 1991), confidence (Stajkovic and Luthans, 1998), resilience (Masten, 2001), and optimism (Seligman, 2002). Luthans et al. (2004) revised these four constructs into an overall construct of positive organizational behavior based on hope, efficacy, resilience, and optimism.

The premise of psychological phenomena shaping and motivating changes in employee attitudes and behaviors is not new. Chen et al. (2000) indicated that trait-like personalities tend to be stable over time and are not influenced by specific tasks or situations while state-like psychological capacities are more specific to certain situations and malleable over time. Luthans et al. (2005) pointed out the need for research on state-like psychological capacities of employees rather than trait-like personalities in order to integrate positive organizational behavior in business environments. The positive psychology movement has reinforced the notion that psychological strengths can shape attitudes and lead to desirable outcomes in the workplace (Lyubomirsky et al., 2005). The goal of the positive psychology movement has been to use scientific methodology to analyze and promote factors that build upon the strengths of people rather than being preoccupied with their weaknesses (Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi, 2000; Smith and Rutigliano, 2003).

Hope, efficacy, resilience, and optimism have been studied as components of psychological capital which is defined as "an individual's positive psychological state of development characterized by: (1) having confidence (self-efficacy) to take on and put in the necessary effort to succeed at challenging tasks; (2) making a positive attribution (optimism) about succeeding now and in the future; (3)

persevering toward the goals, and when necessary, redirecting paths to goals (hope) in order to succeed; and (4) when beset by problems and adversity, sustaining and bouncing back and even beyond (resilience) to attain success" (Luthans, Youssef and Avolio, 2007). While efficacy, optimism, and hope are proactive constructs in the workplace, resilience is more of a reactive capacity that one draws upon when faced with adversity. Although each core component of PsyCap has demonstrated convergent and discriminant validity, prior research has established that PsyCap is a higher-order construct that predicts performance and employee satisfaction better than the individual components (Luthans, Avolio, Avey and Norman, 2007).

The construct of psychological capital has been studied in numerous organizational settings and has associated with a number of metrics of success. For example, in a meta-analysis of 51 studies, Avey et al. (2011) found significant positive relationships between PsyCap and desirable employee attitudes including psychological well-being, job satisfaction, and organizational commitment. The results were strongest for service oriented firms in the United States and suggested that sales people high in PsyCap are hopeful in terms of accomplishing their goals, are optimistic about attaining positive outcomes, have efficacy beliefs that they can make a positive difference for their organization, and have the ability to bounce back from setbacks. With the high turnover patterns of employees in sales organizations, an examination of the relationship between the PsyCap and attitudinal outcomes seems especially relevant. Although the relationships among these variables have been established in other business environments, this is one of the first studies to explore PsyCap within a sales environment. In summary, we propose the following:

H1: PsyCap is positively correlated with organizational commitment.

Job satisfaction is generally considered a desirable work-related outcome. In a meta-analysis with a combined N of 54,417, Judge et al. (2001) found a true mean correlation between job satisfaction and job performance. Moreover, Lambert et al. (2001) also found that job satisfaction had a direct and significant relationship with turnover intentions of employees. We propose the following:

H2: Job satisfaction is positively correlated with organizational commitment.

Eisenberger et al. (1997) defined perceived organizational support as the general belief about the extent that an organization values the accomplishments and well-being of its employees. Perceived organizational support has been studied in sales organizations (Eder and Eisenberger, 2008; Eisenberger et al., 2002) and international sales settings (Moideenkutty et al., 2006; Nguyen and Nguyen, 2012; Rutherford et al., 2011). In addition, Rutherford et al. (2011) examined the relationship between job satisfaction and organizational support and found a significant positive correlation relationship between these two constructs. As such, we predict the following:

H3: Perceived organizational support is positively correlated with organizational commitment.

Organizational commitment has been studied in numerous business environments. For example, Larson and Luthans (2006) and Luthans, Avolio, Avey and Norman (2007), found that PsyCap and job satisfaction were correlated with organizational commitment in several manufacturing environments. In addition, Luthans and Jensen (2005) found a positive correlation between psychological capital and organization commitment in a health care environment through a study of nurses. Organizational commitment is considered critical for the success of sales organizations striving to create value for their customers through the development of long-term relationships. Babakus et al. (1996) found a positive and significant relationship between perceived organizational support and job satisfaction. Within the existing body of research, the theoretical differences between perceived organizational support and job satisfaction have been established by Shore and Tetrick (1991) and Eisenberger et al. (1997).

METHODOLOGY

A convenience sample of sales associates representing a mix of product and service oriented businesses was generated through member organizations of the Chamber of Commerce of a mid-sized city in the Midwest. Employees working in sales for these respective organizations were invited to complete the survey and were informed that participation in the study was voluntary and that anonymity of individual results would be preserved through reporting based on aggregated data. This resulted in 122 participants in the study with 108 usable surveys included in the final sample. A majority of respondents in the sample were male (69%) and 64% were under the age of 50 years old. The income level of 69% of the respondents was over $50,000 per year and 87% were full-time employees working 40 hours per week or more.

Multi-item scales were adapted from previous scales in the marketing and organizational behavior literature. The 12-item scale for PsyCap developed and validated by Luthans, Avolio, Avey and Norman (2007) was adapted for this study and included the following sample items; "If I should find myself in a jam at work, I could think of many ways to get out of it", and "I'm optimistic about what will happen to me in the future as it pertains to work."

Perceived organizational support was measured with a 3-item scale adapted from Eisenberger et al. (1997). Items used to measure perceived organizational support include "I have access to the resources needed to improve and learn new skills", "I have frequent opportunities to learn about new and more effective ways of doing my job", and "My company has invested a great deal in my career development". Job satisfaction was measured with a 3-item scale adapted from Hackman and Oldham (1980). Respondents were asked "Generally speaking, I am very satisfied with my job", "I am generally satisfied with the feeling of worthwhile accomplishment I get from doing this job", and "I am generally satisfied with the kind of work I do in this job."

Wright and Bonett (2002) found that organizational commitment was a multidimensional construct related to workplace performance and affective organizational commitment has been utilized in previous research to capture an employee's emotional desire to stay with an organization rather than a calculated decision based on perceived costs of leaving the organization or a sense of obligation. The 7-item scale for organizational commitment was adapted from Allen and Meyer's (1990) scale of affective organizational commitment. Sample items include "I would be very happy to spend the rest of my career with this organization" and "This organization has a great deal of personal meaning to me."

ANALYSIS

The purpose of this exploratory study is to examine the relationship of PsyCap, job satisfaction, and organizational support as drivers of organizational commitment. Descriptive statistics, reliability scores, and correlations for each variable are reported in Table 1.

Table 1
Correlations, Descriptive Statistics, and Scale Reliabilities

	1	2	3	4
1. Psychological Capital	1.00			
2. Job Satisfaction	.672*	1.00		
3. Perceived Organizational Support	.420*	.526*	1.00	
4. Organizational Commitment	.632*	.701*	.630*	1.00
Mean	4.914	6.031	5.333	5.372
Standard Deviation	0.562	0.951	1.036	1.145
Cronbach's Alpha	0.872	0.898	0.719	0.893

$*p < .01$

As expected, PsyCap (r=.632, p=.000), Job Satisfaction (r=.701, p=.000), and Organizational Support (r=.630, p=.000) are positively and significantly correlated with Organizational Commitment. Furthermore, consistent with Rutherford et al. (2011), positive and significant correlations were found among PsyCap, Job Satisfaction, and Perceived Organizational Support.

Hierarchical regression analysis with Organizational Commitment as the dependent variable was used to test the hypotheses in this study. In model one, control variables for gender, age, and education were included as covariates in the analysis and did not have a significant effect on Organizational Commitment (F=.833, p=.479). Next, Job Satisfaction, Perceived Organization Support, and PsyCap were included in model two and had a positive and significant effect on Organizational Commitment (F=28.811, p=.000). In support of H1, the effect of Job Satisfaction on Organizational Commitment is positive and significant (b=.440, p<.01). The analysis also supports H2 where the effect of Organizational Support on Organizational Commitment is positive and significant (b=.385, p<.01) and H3 where the effect of PsyCap on Organizational Commitment is positive and significant (b=.535, p<.01). A summary of the results can be seen in Table 2.

Table 2
Predictors of Organizational Commitment

	Model 1		Model 2	
Variable	ß	SE	ß	SE
Control Variables				
Constant	4.694	.831	-1.410	.758
Gender	-.075	.248	.055	.160
Age	.132	.094	-.051	.061
Education	.024	.096	-.083	.061
Predictor Variables				
Job Satisfaction			.440*	.110
Perceived Organizational Support			.385*	.082
Psychological Capital			.535*	.171
R^2	.023		.631	
F	.833		28.811*	

*$p < .01$

Notes: Unstandardized beta coefficients are reported. SE = Standard error.

While Organizational Commitment can be influenced by developing a strong sense of Perceived Organizational Support and Job Satisfaction, PsyCap provides an opportunity to increased organizational commitment. In particular, sales managers may be able to identify areas of intervention, education, and support to augment efforts to increase job satisfaction and perceived organizational support when attempting to increase organizational commitment of the sales force.

PSYCHOLOGICAL CAPITAL INTERVENTION

While there are a number of factors that can influence sales force morale and motivation (Churchill et al., 2003), Skinner and Kelley (2006) point out that sales researchers have been slow to adopt methods of positive psychology in the area of sales force management. The findings from this study indicate that those sales personnel who possess greater levels of PsyCap have higher levels of perceived organizational support, job satisfaction, and commitment to their organization. As managers seek to increase retention rates of sales personnel, PsyCap may represent a new opportunity to enhance job satisfaction and organizational commitment in order to attract and retain members of the sales force. Based on the results of this study, the following strategies for developing

the PsyCap for members of a sales force are offered to help managers improve organizational commitment.

As outlined previously, a key feature of PsyCap is that it is malleable and can be developed within individuals in order to enhance job satisfaction and organizational commitment (Youssef and Luthans, 2007). Furthermore, a recent literature review of positive psychology interventions in organizations by Meyers et al. (2013) concluded that positive psychology interventions in the workplace consistently enhance employee well-being. Since employees with higher levels of well-being are less likely to leave an organization than those with lower levels of well-being (Griffeth et al., 2000), a set of guidelines for developing PsyCap among members of a sales force is proposed. In particular, Luthans et al. (2006) have developed a PsyCap Intervention (PCI) training model which has demonstrated the ability to enhance the psychological strengths of human resources in a variety of contexts. In addition, Luthans et al. (2010) demonstrated the ability to develop psychological capital in a study of managers sampled from a cross-section of organizations and industries. Results from the study indicated that those managers who underwent the PCI had significantly higher levels of PsyCap following the training program. Interestingly, the analysis also demonstrated that the development of PsyCap caused a significant increase in both self-rated and manager-rated performance. The PCI model utilized in previous research has focused on developing the four psychological resources of hope, efficacy/confidence, resilience, and optimism. Each of these four, when combined into PsyCap, could be readily customized for the development of PsyCap among members of a sales force.

Hope

Drawing upon the theoretical and clinical guidelines outlined by Snyder (2000) and Snyder et al. (2002), hope is developed in the PCI through goal design, pathway generation, and strategies for overcoming obstacles. For example, in order to enhance their levels of hope, members of the sales force would be asked to identify work-related goals which are specific, measurable, attainable, relevant, and timely (i.e., "SMART" goals) that support the overall sales strategy of the organization. In a sales environment, this could include identification and prioritization of sales leads by sales personnel. Next, they would be asked to identify or create communication plans, anticipate potential objections, and to identify the resources required to pursue the pathway to success for each sales lead. After examining the routes to reach the goals for each sales lead, the unrealistic ones would be discarded and a smaller number of realistic pathways would identified with action plans for each sales lead. The overall goal is to increase hope of sales representatives with respect to the ability to reach organizational and individual objectives.

Efficacy/Confidence

The next psychological resource targeted for development in the PCI model would be efficacy or confidence. The following sources of efficacy development have been adapted from Bandura (1997): Mastery experiences, vicarious learning, positive feedback, and workplace well-being. The PCI developed by Luthans et al. (2006) allows participants to experience and model success related to their personal goals. Specific examples of how these development techniques could be operationalized for the enhancement of efficacy among members of the sales force are included below:

Mastery Experiences

When individuals successfully accomplish a challenging task such as closing a sale, they are generally more confident in their abilities to accomplish the task again in the future. Task mastery can be a potent source of efficacy beliefs because it provides direct credible information about past success. One practical suggestion for developing efficacy among members of the sales force would be detailed product and service training. This would be a critical practice for newly hired sales

representatives and for the entire sales force when new products are launched. Providing guided mastery experiences with mentors on sales calls would help to build efficacy early in the process of onboarding new sales employees. However, managers need to identify appropriate levels of opportunities for all members of the sales force. In particular, new members of the sales force should not be given exceedingly stressful or difficult assignments that could have a detrimental effect on efficacy. On the other hand, efficacy built from successes that come too easily will not enhance levels of efficacy. The research by Bandura (1999) indicated that mastery experiences attained through perseverant effort and ability to learn build a strong perception of efficacy.

Vicarious Learning

Bandura (1997) noted that if individuals observe the success of other members of the sales force, they will have increased efficacy in their own ability to succeed. The magnitude of such modeling is dependent on the perceived expertise and similarity of the role model who successfully completed the task. Applied to the development of efficacy within the sales force, the increased use of job shadowing, sales planning, sales presentations, and team selling arrangements could result in enhanced efficacy development. Having the opportunity to regularly communicate with relevant others and observe how high performing role models perform their jobs would instill confidence and lead to the conclusion that "if they can do it, I can do it too." The identification and sharing of best practices can be instrumental in developing the efficacy of the sales force.

Feedback is essential for learning, motivation, and for increasing confidence. In fact, Kluger and DeNisi (1996) found that providing feedback to employees about their performance will lead to better subsequent performance than those who did not receive performance feedback. Based upon these findings, sales managers should be able to increase the motivation and confidence of the sales force through sincere and objective feedback.

A final source of efficacy is one's physical and emotional state of well-being. If members of the sales force feel overly anxious or physically tired, their efficacy is likely to be diminished. Although this source of efficacy is probably the least powerful, it still has applications for helping sales people to overcome challenges related to their job. For example, improved scheduling and communication could be utilized to make sure that personnel are not pushed to physical exhaustion. In addition, realistic deadlines could be set to make sure that members of the sales force do not feel excessive pressure and anxiety on a particular sales call or presentation. Organizations could also provide wellness programs with access to gym memberships and other services in order to prevent burnout, manage stress, and help their employees keep mentally and physically fit.

Resilience

A key area of development in the PCI for the sales force is resilience. Lost sales opportunities happen for nearly every sales representative and the ability to bounce back or move onto the next opportunity is crucial for long-term success. The research by Masten (2001) identified asset and risk factors related to positive outcomes and adaptation to challenging circumstances. In a sales setting, this could include sales communications or efforts to close a sale that are ineffective and the sales interaction is not successful. The most effective development strategies tend to be based upon enhancing assets through training, mentoring programs, product training, technology proficiency, and enhancing verbal and written communication skills. Work conditions and sales situations need to be managed well in order to enhance resilience and sales managers will need to monitor potential challenges in the sales environment (e.g., time spent on travel for sales calls, working long, strenuous hours, and perceived lack of support from organization, etc.).

Optimism

Stemming from the work of Seligman (2002), the PCI model also offers a relevant framework for developing realistic optimism among members of the sales force. Optimism could be enhanced by asking the employee to reflect, diagnose, and identify self-defeating beliefs when faced with adversity with the overall sales environment such as being away from home several nights at a time, selling new products, product failure, delivery issues, payment challenges, contract negotiation, and working with challenging clients. Next, members of the sales force would be asked to reflect and evaluate the accuracy of their beliefs about specific events, specific products, or specific customers. Finally, it can be helpful to ask sales representatives to question their current set of beliefs and searching for more realistic, constructive, and accurate opportunities and pathways to success. In a sales environment, the sharing of best practices by top performers can be instrumental in the development of optimism for members of the sales force.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR MARKETING PRACTITIONERS

Retention of employees in sales continues to be a challenge for sales managers. While the costs of recruiting and replacing have been well-documented in previous studies, the purpose of this exploratory research was to determine if PCI could be included as part of the effort to retain members of a sales force through increased commitment to the organization. Previous research has linked PsyCap and the underlying psychological phenomena of hope, efficacy, resilience, and optimism to the organizational commitment of employees in numerous industries. Future research will be needed to empirically test the PCI model in the wild.

Results from this study were the first to demonstrate a positive and significant relationship between PsyCap and organizational commitment for members of the sales force. In addition, detailed PCI has been proposed as means of elevating PsyCap. The results of this study suggest that companies have an opportunity to look beyond conventional efforts to improve job satisfaction and organizational commitment. However, a bigger question has to do with differences in academic and practitioner communities with respect to sales management and was one of the main reasons that we embarked on this project. Our goal was to leverage past academic research to propose a potential intervention model for practitioners in sales management. In the end, we have conducted an exploratory research project as a first step in the development of a model for intervention and additional empirical research with practitioners will be needed to refute, refine, or support our model.

It is important to note that constructs such as resiliency and vicarious learning are perceived by individual sales persons and organizations can provide an environment that provides a sales person an opportunity to achieve task mastery through formal training or vicarious learning. Future research on PsyCap in a sales environment could provide insights on the enhancement of employee orientation, professional development, and retention programs. This could include specific forms of short-term interventions for onboarding new members of the sales force or integrated with the overall development and retention efforts of top-performing sales persons. In addition, future research on PCI could be linked to specific measures of performance including revenue, prospecting activities, close rates, presentation skills, and customer relationship management.

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