

A Model of the Determinants and Outcomes of Salespeople's Coping Style

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Abstract

The study examines relationships between salespeople's psychological constructs, coping style, and several stress-related and performance outcomes. The proposed model of determinants and outcomes of salespeople's coping style was developed and analyzed in light of the need to advance knowledge regarding how salespeople cope with chronic job stress. Separate networks of determinants and outcomes exist for PFC and EFC. Use of PFC appears to be facilitated by a clearer understanding of one's job role (increased role clarity) along with a higher level of confidence in one's job skills (self-efficacy). Furthermore, PFC has a direct impact on job and life satisfaction. Salespeople's use of EFC apparently is driven by an external focus along with seeking support from friends and coworkers. Also, job stress perceptions arising from perceived role conflict contribute to use of EFC. EFC, moreover, conduces to burnout, depression, and job dissatisfaction. Managerial and research implications are offered.

Keywords: coping styles, problem-focused coping, emotion-focused coping, job stress, performance, emotional exhaustion, withdrawal intentions, industrial salespeople

1. Introduction

Salespeople exist in an environment where stress fluctuates. Being a boundary role person interfacing with various role partners (e.g., buyers, prospects, and managers) subjects salespeople to above average levels of stress (Edmondson & Boyer, 2013). Sales management researchers (e.g., Avlonitis & Panagopoulos, 2006; Kim et al., 2009) contend that the boundary-spanning role of salespeople contributes to role conflict and role ambiguity (i.e., role stressors). These two characteristics conduce to dissatisfaction with the sales job, as well as to job-related tension—more generally referred to as job stress—(e.g., Jaramillo, Mulki, & Boles, 2011; Verbeke et al., 2011; Nygaard & Dahlstrom, 2002), as well as to such negative outcomes as job withdrawal, burnout, and decreased performance (e.g., Boyd et al., 2009; Gilboa et al., 2008; Kahn et al., 1964).

The prevalence of role stressors begs the question how some salespeople manage chronic job stress better than others. One answer is that some salespeople *cope* with the chronic stress that accompanies a boundary spanner role better than others (e.g., Lewin & Sager, 2008, 2010; Nygaard & Dahlstrom, 2002). Coping fills an intervening role between determinants of stress and outcomes of stress. As Oakland and Ostell (1996, p. 133) aver: “[C]oping behavior is a major component in the relationship between the experience of stress and outcomes such as poor psychological health and physical symptoms.” Coping entails a process people use to attend to strains associated with chronic job stress (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Although several sales management researchers address determinants or outcomes of salespeople's job stress (e.g., Bhuian et al., 2005; Verbeke et al., 2011; Nygaard & Dahlstrom, 2002), relatively little theory or research addresses *directly* the relationship between *coping styles* and salespeople's perceived *job stress*. Studying coping styles could assist

researchers in identifying networks of psychological constructs salespeople use for coping and help sales managers aid their sales personnel to manage job stress effectively.

Given the foregoing, this study proposes and tests a psychological model of determinants and outcomes of salespeople's coping style. The model integrates core self-evaluations (Judge et al., 1998) and role stress as determinants of job stress and coping styles. It also reconnoiters relationships between coping styles and salespeople's attitudes towards job and life satisfaction and to performance, withdrawal intentions, depression, and burnout.

2. Coping and Coping Style

Outcomes of successful coping tend to be positive: reduced depression, lower withdrawal intentions, and increased performance (e.g., Hatinen et al., 2013; Hu & Cheng, 2010; Jenaro et al., 2007; Latack, 1986). Coping reduces negative job stress reactions and positively influences well-being by attending salubriously to the determinants of stress (e.g., Chao, 2011; Folkman et al., 1986a, 1986b). Coping affects outcomes directly and stressors indirectly through altering outcomes (Cummings & Cooper, 1979).

A coping style is the approach an individual takes to attending to stress on the job (Selye, 1980). A salesperson uses a coping style to manage stressful instances (Edwards & Baglioni, 1993; Tulvig, 1983). Lazarus and Folkman (1984) identify two styles people use to cope with stress: Problem-Focused Coping (PFC or active coping) and Emotion-Focused Coping (EFC or avoidance coping). *PFC* entails a problem-solving approach. It involves the salesperson's researching a source of stress, generating alternatives, weighing the alternatives in terms of costs and benefits to the self and organization, and selecting an alternative based on a balance between cost and benefit (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). *EFC* occurs when a salesperson seeks to regulate emotions that accompany the chronic stress of the sales task (Folkman et al., 1986b). The PFC/EFC approach has received substantial empirical support (e.g., Chao, 2011; Hatinen et al., 2013; Jex et al., 2001). Findings from Folkman and Lazarus (1986b) and Strutton and Lumpkin (1994) indicate that PFC is the preferred approach to work place coping.

3. Model of Determinants and Outcomes of Salespeople's Coping Styles

Coping at work affects psychological and behavioral outcomes (Edwards, 1988, 1992; Edwards & Baglioni, 1993). Shown in Figure 1 is the proposed model of determinants and outcomes of salespeople's coping style (also depicted are alternate paths in the model (denoted with an "A")).

The proposed model posits that two role stressors—role conflict and role clarity—and three psychological variables—external locus, self-efficacy beliefs, and social support—are related to a salesperson's use of PFC or EFC. External locus of control and self-efficacy are coping resources that function as part of an individual's self-regulatory system (Judge et al., 1998; Kinicki, Prussia, & McKee-Ryan, 2000). Social support is a perceived external factor that also assists the salesperson in managing his/her internal discomfort (e.g., job stress).

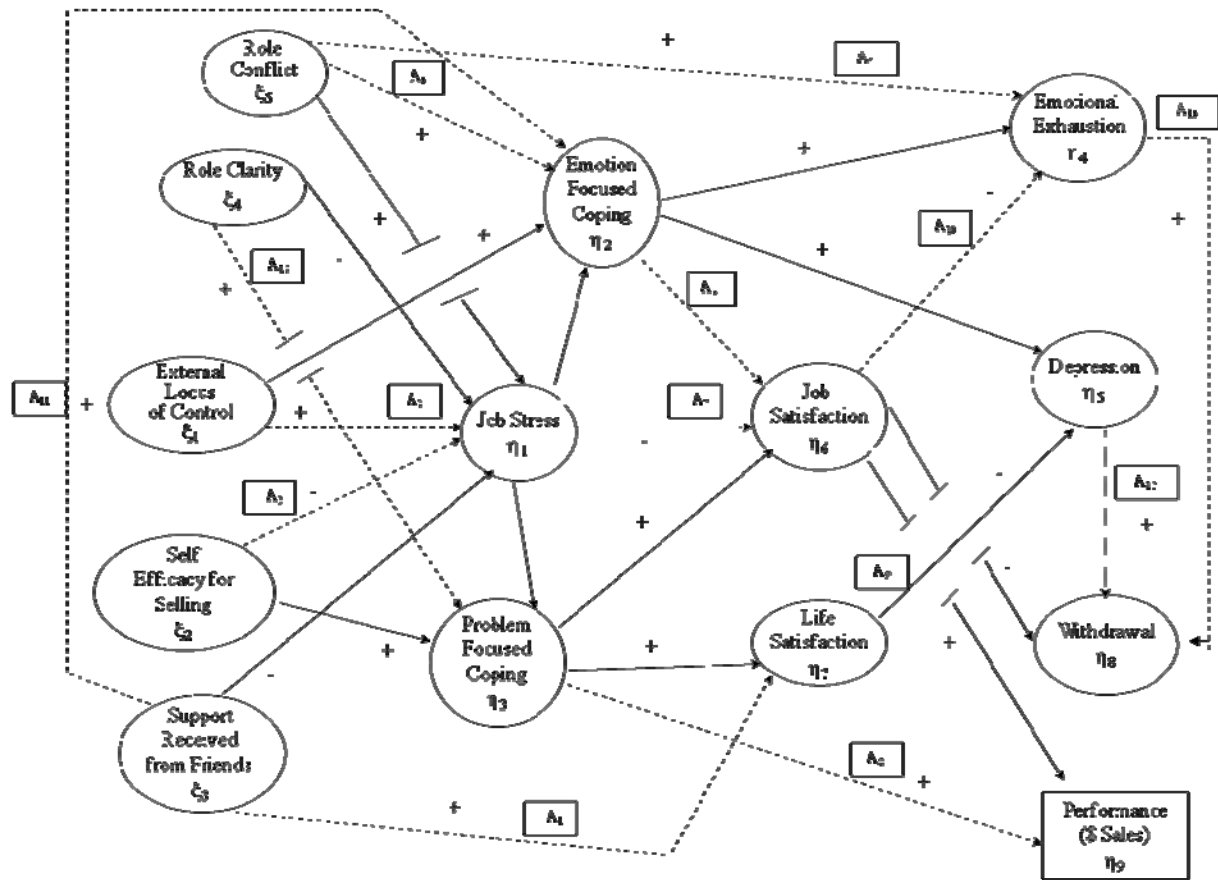


Figure 1. Proposed model and alternate paths

3.1 Precursors of Job Stress and Coping Style

The following sections propose relationships between the foregoing determinants and PFC and EFC and with job stress and other work-related outcomes. Support for these putative associations now follows.

3.1.1 Job Stress

Salespeople’s job stress is a psychological response to work-based expectations, demands, and constraints in a situation where outcomes are important but uncertain (Sager & Wilson, 1995). In this study, job stress is a conduit (mediator) between antecedents of PFC or EFC coping styles. It also serves as a nexus between these precursors and study outcomes *through* job satisfaction (Path A7 in Figure 1), which corresponds with a role perceptions-driven framework—initially promulgated by Walker, Churchill, and Ford (1977).

3.1.2 External Locus of Control

Locus of control captures a general belief that events and outcomes in life are controlled either by one’s own actions (internality) or by other, outside forces (externality). Internals perceive more constructive alternatives to a problem or situation than do externals (Rotter, 1966; Spector, 1982). Research investigating the role of locus of control relative to coping suggests that internals are more likely to view job stress as controllable than do their external counterparts (e.g., Leiter, 1991; Lewin & Sager, 2010). Tanck and Robbins (1979) observe that internals tend to use cognitive analysis, critically examining the causes of stress and developing alternative ways to handle stress (Callan & Dickson, 1992).

Internal locus of control aligns with PFC. Externals view themselves as lacking power to influence events in the work environment. They are more inclined to attribute workplace outcomes to outside sources: chance, competitors’ efforts, product features, or behavior of their managers or company (Lewin & Sager, 2010). Bagozzi (1978) avers that other-directedness (externality) is inversely related to self-esteem and therein should correlate positively with evasion of responsibility (EFC or avoidance) and negatively with confrontation with a source of stress (PFC or active coping).

The proposed model posits that external locus of control directly affects a salesperson’s use of EFC. Based on

the foregoing dialectic, alternate Path A3 (Figure 1) proposes that an external locus directly affects job stress and *indirectly* influences PFC and EFC through job stress.

3.1.3 Social Support

Social support refers to “the set of ...resources (actual or perceived) available from one or more others to assist the focal person in the management of stress experiences and to increase the experience of well being” (McIntosh, 1991, p. 202). Individuals employ support provided by coworkers, friends, and family members to reduce job stress (House, 1981) and help manage their work situation (Lewin & Sager, 2008; Stan et al., 2012).

Two explanations are proposed regarding the social support/job stress association. One rationale pertains to the *social* hypothesis, which posits that social support reduces stress *directly*. Feelings of support from supervisors, coworkers, and family members putatively decrease job stress (McIntosh, 1991), as such succor aids the salesperson to better deal with job stress. Path A1 proposes that social support also relates positively to life satisfaction. The logic is that positive help that supervisors, coworkers, and family members might provide a salesperson should facilitate his/her well-being and concomitant life satisfaction.

The other rationale, the *buffering* hypothesis, propounds that social support *indirectly* influences job stress through coping (Fusilier, Ganster, & Mayes, 1987; Lewin & Sager, 2008). Under the buffering relationship (A11), salespeople perceiving greater social support will likely employ EFC (Srivastava & Sager, 1999). In other words, a salesperson perceives job stress as more manageable to the extent that support from the manager, coworkers, and/or family members facilitate coping.

3.1.4 Self-Efficacy

Self-efficacy reflects salespersons' evaluation of their personal capability to accomplish work-related performance (Bandura, 1986). Moos and Billings (1982) observe that individuals possessing lower self-efficacy beliefs are inclined to avoid confronting stressors by utilizing escape-based coping (i.e., EFC). Salespeople possessing greater self-efficacy beliefs incorporate increased activity and persistence in attempts to manage chronic stress (Jex & Bliese, 1999; Kinicki, Prussia, & McKee-Ryan, 2000). Therefore, individuals with higher self-efficacy beliefs tend to choose coping strategies that have a maximum likelihood of reducing adverse effects of job stress (i.e., PFC) (Arnold et al., 2009; Edwards, 1988; Leiter, 1991). Use of PFC entails having higher confidence in one's selling skills. Accordingly, salespersons' self-efficacy beliefs are proposed to be positively related to use of PFC (Lewin & Sager, 2008; Srivastava & Sager, 1999).

A2 proposes that self-efficacy is associated with PFC via job stress—an indirect association (Mulki, Lassk, & Jaramillo, 2008). As such, job stress serves as a mediator of the self-efficacy/coping style relationship.

3.1.5 Role Conflict and Role Clarity

An extensive body of literature supports relationships between role clarity (e.g., Onyemah, 2008) and role conflict (e.g., Bhuian et al., 2005) with a panoply of job-related outcomes (e.g., Jaramillo, Mulki, & Boles, 2011). Popularized by Kahn et al. (1964), role theory provides ample support for the framework of the determinants of salesperson performance developed by Walker, Churchill, and Ford (1977). That framework specifies linkages between role accuracy, role conflict, role ambiguity, and a set of outcomes that include job satisfaction and job stress. The basis for proposed linkages is that job stress will be encountered partially to the extent that the salesperson perceives vagaries and inconsistencies between demands of upper management, sales managers, and customers captured through role clarity and role conflict. The proposed model specifies that role conflict and role clarity directly influence job stress (e.g., House & Rizzo, 1972). In other words, to the extent that conflict is perceived, stress will be augmented. And to the degree that the salesperson clearly perceives his/her job role, stress will be lower.

Although role conflict might contribute to job stress directly, and ultimately to coping, it may be positively associated with EFC—and therefore indirectly influence emotional exhaustion (A4). After all, undue role conflict may impel the salesperson to engage in escapism (EFC) to avoid the seemingly noxious situation. An intuitive alternative relationship (A13) posits that role clarity is a determinant in the use of PFC. That is, the greater clarity a salesperson has pertaining to how to perform the job, the more likely PFC will be employed.

3.2 Outcomes of Job Stress, PFC, and EFC

The model proposes relationships between PFC/EFC and six outcomes: job and life satisfaction, emotional exhaustion, depression, withdrawal, and performance. Satisfaction has been addressed extensively in the sales management literature (e.g., Darrat, Amyx, & Bennett, 2010). Depression and emotional exhaustion (a key component of burnout) are important to those who study coping, role stress, and performance (Hatinen et al.,

2013; Moore, 2000; Shepherd, Tashchian, & Ridnour, 2011). Withdrawal intentions are of interest to those investigating turnover and employee behavior in work organizations (e.g., Vandenberghe et al., 2011). Performance is a key outcome in the sales management literature (Hair et al., 2008). The following sections propose relationships between coping styles and the foregoing outcome variables.

3.2.1 Job Satisfaction and Life Satisfaction

Job stress has an adverse impact on satisfaction (e.g., Boles, Johnston, & Hair, 1997; Boles, Wood, & Johnson, 2003). In the proposed model, PFC mediates salespeople's perception of job stress and job satisfaction and also has a direct impact on job satisfaction. As such, the extent of dissatisfaction associated with job stress is partly a function of whether a salesperson employs PFC. If salespeople cope with PFC, thus reducing stress, they seemingly will be more satisfied with the job (Folkman & Lazarus, 1986b). If salespeople cope through EFC, however, they might be less satisfied (A6), owing to the potentially dysfunctional characteristics of EFC (noted earlier).

The model also posits a positive effect of PFC on life satisfaction. Life satisfaction is reflective of how favorably people view their overall life situation (e.g., Erdogan et al., 2012; Kinicki, Prussia, & McKee-Ryan, 2000). If individuals cope with stress in an active, problem-solving, functional manner (PFC), they conceivably will have higher life satisfaction because of their effectiveness at managing onerous situations.

3.2.2 Performance

Performance occurs over time, presumably paralleling a business cycle (e.g., monthly goals, quarterly goals, cyclical goals). Assuming chronic stress cycles with performance, a salesperson who copes effectively with chronic job stress over a sales cycle is likely to have higher job performance. The proposed model also suggests that job satisfaction is positively associated with performance, per the Walker, Churchill, and Ford (1977) model of salesperson performance. PFC varies systematically with performance (Folkman & Lazarus, 1986b). Thus, A8 promulgates a direct relationship between PFC and performance.

3.2.3 Depression

Researchers believe that chronic excessive job stress harms well-being and promotes depression (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Ryff (1989) conceives well-being as entailing self-acceptance, positive relations with others, environmental mastery, purpose in life, and personal growth. Depression connotes the opposite of well-being.

Selye (1980) indicates that people cope to lessen the personal impact of job stress and thereby maintain or improve well-being. Salespeople who use EFC may experience depression; empirical support for that association has been found (e.g., Smith & Sulsky, 1995). Therefore, the proposed model posits a positive relationship between EFC and depression. Alternatively, A9 incorporates an *indirect* relationship between PFC and depression through life satisfaction. The idea is that PFC, a job-focused style, does *not* directly influence *emotional-related* outcomes.

3.2.4 Emotional Exhaustion

Emotional exhaustion was selected to represent burnout because it is considered by some burnout theorists to be the primary component of burnout and perhaps the initial component in a burnout process (e.g., Hatinen et al., 2013; Lee & Ashforth, 1996; Narumoto et al., 2008). Pines and Maslach (1988, p. 288) characterize burnout as "...a state of physical and emotional exhaustion involving the development of negative self-concept, negative job attitude, and loss of concern and feelings for clients." Burnout arises as a consequence of the strain chronic stress places on a worker (e.g., Hatinen et al., 2013; Lewin & Sager, 2008; Shepherd, Tashchian, & Ridnour, 2011). The proposed model posits that emotional exhaustion (burnout) is an outcome of EFC. The model indicates that salespeople relying on EFC experience greater emotional exhaustion.

Three alternative relationships capture outcomes that have been empirically linked to emotional exhaustion. Lee and Ashforth (1996) report a positive, significant correlation across studies for role conflict and emotional exhaustion (A5), which has been corroborated in a sales context (Boles et al., 1997; Shepherd, Tashchian, & Ridnour, 2011). Also, Moore (2000) posits that voluntary turnover, a form of withdrawal, is an *outcome* of emotional exhaustion (A14)—an expectation supported for turnover intentions in the Lee and Ashforth (1996) meta-analysis, and with a sales force sample (Boles et al., 1997). Also, EFC, an avoidance mechanism, negatively influences job satisfaction (A6), and that through job stress and EFC, job (dis)satisfaction contributes to emotional exhaustion (A10).

3.2.5 Withdrawal Intentions

Rosse and Hulin (1985) define withdrawal as declining participation in a job. Conceivably, if a salesperson

perceives higher stress over a protracted period and copes ineffectually, then he/she will likely ultimately withdraw (e.g., Boles et al., 2012). Alternatively, if a salesperson possesses higher self-efficacy beliefs, employs PFC, and experiences augmented job satisfaction, he/she might be more inclined to intend to remain in the organization—lower withdrawal intentions (Figure 1). Many studies support an inverse relationship between job satisfaction and intention to leave (e.g., Anton, 2009; Chen et al., 2011; Purani & Sahadev, 2008; Yankelevich, 2012). Also, because depression is inimical to a salesperson, it likely leads to his/her to consider leaving the organization (A12). That is, a salesperson being enveloped with a low level of well-being may result in the individual feeling hopeless and impelling him/her to consider departing from the firm.

4. Method

4.1 Sample

The sample comprised the domestic U.S. sales force employed by an international manufacturer of specialty chemical products. The U. S. sales organization employed 1200 salespeople and 100 sales managers in several geographic divisions. Twenty-five percent of salespeople were females (forty percent of new hires). Eighty percent possessed a college degree or had partially completed college. Annual retention rate was slightly below fifty percent.

Questionnaires were sent to all 1200 salespeople. Usable questionnaires were returned from 452 respondents (46 percent response rate), of whom 323 were male (72 percent of responses) and 123 were female (28 percent). To assess representativeness of the sample to the sampling frame, demographics of the respondents were compared with those of the entire sales force, and demographic characteristics of late responders were contrasted with those of early responders. Tenure was the only demographic characteristic that varied systematically: fifty-four percent of respondents had worked for the subject company for five or more years.

4.2 Measures

Shown in the appendix are all *multi-item* measures. A partial disaggregation model was employed to adapt each of the established measures. A partial disaggregation model was utilized to decrease the unwieldy nature of a total disaggregation model (Bagozzi & Heatherton, 1994), where all items comprising a measure are used as indicators of a research construct.

Given that sales personnel were compensated totally on commission, *performance*—the only measure that was not multi-item—was operationalized as the amount of commission income in dollars the salesperson earned in the previous twelve months. The subject company provided the performance data. Revenue data were normalized to achieve an index that would accommodate effectual analysis of the covariance matrix.

5. Results (Note 1)

5.1 Validity of EFC and PFC Coping Styles

Dimensionality of PFC and EFC was assessed using factor analysis. Two factors were supported. No coping items cross-loaded appreciably, suggesting that each measure taps a distinct construct. Subsequently, PFC and EFC were measured simultaneously with the other constructs in the proposed model. The model converged. Residual correlations and fit indices suggested a reasonable fit (Table 1).

Table 1. Nested analysis of proposed model

Models:	Chi		Square/					Chi		Square/	
	Square	p#	df ^a	df	RMSEA ^b	RMSR ^c	TLI ^d	PFI ^e	PCFI	Square	df ^a
Measurement Model (46 item)	1634	.00	899	1.82	.04	.03	.92	.74	.87	-885	13
Just identified Model (all paths or saturated unidirectional)	1638	.00	899	1.82	.04	.03	.92	.73	.87	-886	13
A1 Support from Friends to Life satisfaction (+)	2503	.00	966	2.59	.06	.06	.84	.73	.79	-21	----
A2 Self Efficacy, Selling to Job Stress (+)	2503	.00	966	2.59	.06	.06	.84	.74	.79	-21	----
A3 External Locus of Control to Job stress (+)	2521	.00	966	2.61	.06	.06	.84	.73	.79	-3	----
A4 Role Conflict to Emotion Focused Coping (+)	2475	.00	966	2.56	.06	.06	.84	.74	.80	-50	----
A5 Role Conflict to Emotional Exhaustion (+)	2399	.00	966	2.48	.05	.06	.85	.74	.80	-125	----
A6 Emotion Focused Coping to Job Satisfaction (-)	2421	.00	966	2.51	.05	.06	.85	.74	.80	-97	----
A7 Job Stress to Job Satisfaction (-)	2451	.00	966	2.54	.06	.06	.79	.74	.80	-73	----
A8 Problem Focused Coping to Performance (+)	2516	.00	966	2.60	.06	.06	.84	.74	.79	-8	----
A9 Life Satisfaction to Depression (-)	2350	.00	966	2.43	.05	.07	.86	.74	.78	-174	----
A10 Job Satisfaction to Emotional Exhaustion (-)	2433	.00	966	2.52	.05	.06	.85	.74	.80	-103	----

A11 Support from Friends to EFC (+)	2472	.00	966	2.56	.06	.06	.84	.74	.80	-52	----
A12 Depression to Withdrawal (+)	2524	.00	966	2.61	.06	.06	.84	.73	.79	0	----
A13 Role Clarity to Problem Focused Coping (+)	2478	.00	966	2.56	.06	.06	.84	.74	.79	-46	----
A14 Emotional Exhaustion to Withdrawal (+)	2508	.00	966	2.60	.06	.06	.84	.73	.79	-16	----
Proposed Model (Figure 1)	2524	.00	967	2.61	.06	.06	.84	.74	.79	base point	
B1 Emotion Focused coping to Depression	2683	.00	968	2.77	.06	.07	.82	.73	.78	159	----
B2 Problem Focused coping to Life Satisfaction	2635	.00	968	2.72	.06	.08	.77	.73	.79	111	----
B3 Job Satisfaction to Performance	2526	.00	968	2.61	.06	.06	.84	.74	.80	2	----
Revised Theory Models:											
Augmented Model (Proposed Model + 8 paths)	2017	.00	959	2.10	.05	.04	.89	.76	.83	-507	63
Augmented Model Revised	2021	.00	962	2.10	.05	.05	.89	.76	.84	-503	100
Augmented Model -- Second Revised	2022	.00	963	2.10	.05	.05	.89	.76	.84	-502	126
Structural Null Model (No Paths)	4784	.00	995	4.80	.06	.06	.62	.58	.62	2306	82
Absolute Null Model	11436	.00	1035	11							11

Note. ^a Chi - square per change in degrees of freedom relative to the proposed model (Figure 1); ^b RMSEA : Root Mean Square Error of Approximation; ^c RMSR : Root Mean Square Residual; ^d TLI : Tucker- Lewis index; ^e PFI : Parsimony Goodness of Fit Index; ^f PCFI : Parsimonious Comparative Fit Index; ^g CFI : Comparative Fit Index.

5.2 Structural Model Assessment of the Proposed Model (Figure 1)

The structural models were evaluated within a covariance matrix-nested sequence (Anderson & Gerbing, 1988; James, Muliak, & Brett, 1982; Williams & Holahan, 1994). Under the nested approach, the analyst seeks to identify a model that best reproduces the sample covariance structure matrix and then evaluate its utility relative to the anchor points. A just-identified (nearly saturated) model was computed to provide a basing point for evaluating the utility of the proposed model. The proposed model was nested between the just-identified, less constrained (A1 to A14), and more constrained (B1 to B3—Table 1) models. The absolute null model and the structural null model act as anchor points opposite that of the just-identified model. They indicate what degree of reproduction is achieved with just the model constructs or indicators. The initial hypothesis is that the theory model (Figure 1) best reproduces the covariance structure matrix. Alternative relationships within the theory model are captured by the single degree of freedom alternative paths (A1 to A14) and trimmed paths (B1 to B3).

As shown in Table 1, evaluation of the nested structural models was guided by several indicators. Tucker-Lewis Index and Parsimony Fit Index were monitored for each structural path changed in the proposed model (Alternative Paths A1 to A14). Comparative analyses executed by Williams and Holahan (1994) and Hu and Bentler (1999) suggest that the TLI robustly represents model parsimony. The Parsimonious Comparative Fit Index (PCFI) was examined as well. PCFI captures difference in fit between the absolute null model and a specific structural model, adjusted for degrees of freedom achieved. It symbolizes to what extent a specific structural model explains what cannot be explained by the constructs alone. A model with a PCFI of .90 reproduces ninety percent of the difference between measured constructs (uncorrelated) and the sample covariance structure matrix, adjusted for model degrees of freedom. To index differences between the proposed model and other nested models, change in chi-square per degree of freedom was calculated (Hom & Griffeth, 1991). A one percent improvement in chi-square comprises 25 of the 2500 achieved with the proposed model. As a point for evaluation, it was decided that a one-df change (single path) should improve fit by five percent (-125 chi-square). Residual correlations were evaluated in that inclusion or exclusion of a path should not be associated with an increase in residual correlation as represented by Root Mean Square Error of Approximation or Root Mean Square Residual (Bagozzi & Yi, 1988).

5.3 Proposed Model

The proposed model reproduced the covariance structure matrix to an extent well below that achieved with the just-identified model (Table 1). Residual indices (RMSEA and RMSR) exceeded the .05 level suggested by Bagozzi and Yi (1988). TLI is well below the .92 level of the just-identified model and the .95 benchmark suggested by Hu and Bentler (1999). The more conservative PCFI suggests the proposed determinants and outcomes of coping styles model explains less than eighty percent of chi-square generated by the absolute null model. Thus, the proposed model (in Figure 1) fails to capture relationships between indicators of study constructs at an empirically desirable level.

5.4 Less Constrained, Alternative (A) Models

Alternative models add a single path to the proposed model, as depicted in Figure 1. Paths A1 to A3 suggest paths from exogenous core self-evaluations—social support, selling self-efficacy, and external locus of control—to endogenous constructs. The paths imply that self-evaluation constructs may operate through variables other than through PFC or EFC. None of the three models decreased the difference between reproduced and sample covariance matrixes to a notable extent (Table 1), nor did they reduce the average residual correlation from that achieved with the proposed model.

Paths A4 and A5 posit potential influence of role conflict on EFC (A4) and on emotional exhaustion (A5) (Figure 1). Model A4 offers marginal utility (Table 1). Model A5 improved the fit and reduced residual correlation somewhat. Apparently, perceptions of conflict to a notable extent drive use of EFC and emotional exhaustion beyond that conveyed through job stress.

Path A6 proposes that EFC contributes to job dissatisfaction. That model improved the fit by four percent (a loss of 97 points in chi-square) and improved TLI as well. In the case of Path A7—job stress contributing to job dissatisfaction—chi-square dropped markedly, residual correlations remained constant, and TLI declined. Reduction in the parsimony indicator was troublesome. Possibly the direct path posited in A7 conflicts with the proposed model's indirect path from job stress to job satisfaction through PFC.

Path A8 incorporates a path from PFC to performance. Despite intuitive plausibility, the model failed to increase fit from that achieved with the theoretical model. The inference is that use of PFC cannot be reliably associated with augmented performance.

Path A9 posits that life satisfaction contributes to well-being (reduced depression)—and was supported. Although beyond the immediate study purpose, the path signifies that the way a salesperson approaches the job (by practicing PFC) influences attitude toward life in general and thereby affects well-being. This is compatible with findings reported in the area of work/non-work stress (e.g., Kinicki, Prussia, & McKee-Ryan, 2000). Path A10 proposes that satisfaction with the job is related negatively to emotional exhaustion. Inclusion of the path with the proposed model enhanced reproduction of the results markedly (Table 1).

Model A11 incorporates a path from social support to use of EFC. The idea of the path is that seeking support reflects an emotional coping style. Model fit improved moderately by inclusion of the path, as evidenced by increase in PCFI relative to the proposed model. Path A12 links depression to withdrawal intentions. Although plausible, the path failed to enhance the ability of the model to reproduce the covariance structure matrix. Path A13 posits a relationship between role clarity and PFC. Addition of that relationship increased fit beyond that attained with the proposed model. Path A14 (emotional exhaustion → withdrawal intentions), developed under similar logic, also failed to improve fit.

5.5 More-Constrained (Trimmed—B) Models

Models B1, B2, and B3—noted in Table 1—were useful in evaluating the proposed model. Model B1 omitted the path from EFC to depression. Omitting that path increased chi-square markedly, so the path was retained. Model B2 omitted the path from PFC to life satisfaction. Omission of the path augmented chi-square substantially. Exclusion of the path from job satisfaction to performance (Model B3) failed to raise chi-square to any extent. Thus, analysis indicated that the model (Figure 1) failed to account for performance of the salespeople in the sample population. Because performance was hypothesized to be a part of the structure of interest, the path was retained.

5.6 Augmented Models

Several augmented theory models were used to achieve optimal fit in light of the constructs and theoretical constraints present. Shown in Table 1 are results for three of the augmented models. The first augmented model merged paths A4, A5, A11, A13, A6, A7, A9, and A10 to the proposed model. All fit indices improved. To discern whether greater parsimony could be achieved, several paths were trimmed from the augmented theory model to arrive at an adjusted model (962 df). Paths trimmed included those from social support to job stress, from role conflict to EFC, and from job stress to PFC.

The model revealed three paths from the proposed model (Figure 1: social support to job stress, role clarity to stress, job stress to PFC) and added seven of the fourteen alternative paths (A5, A6, A7, A9, A10, A11, A13). The revised model (Figure 2) maintains the theoretical base of the proposed model and incorporates paths that more efficiently reproduce the covariance matrix within the rubric of related theory and empirical findings.

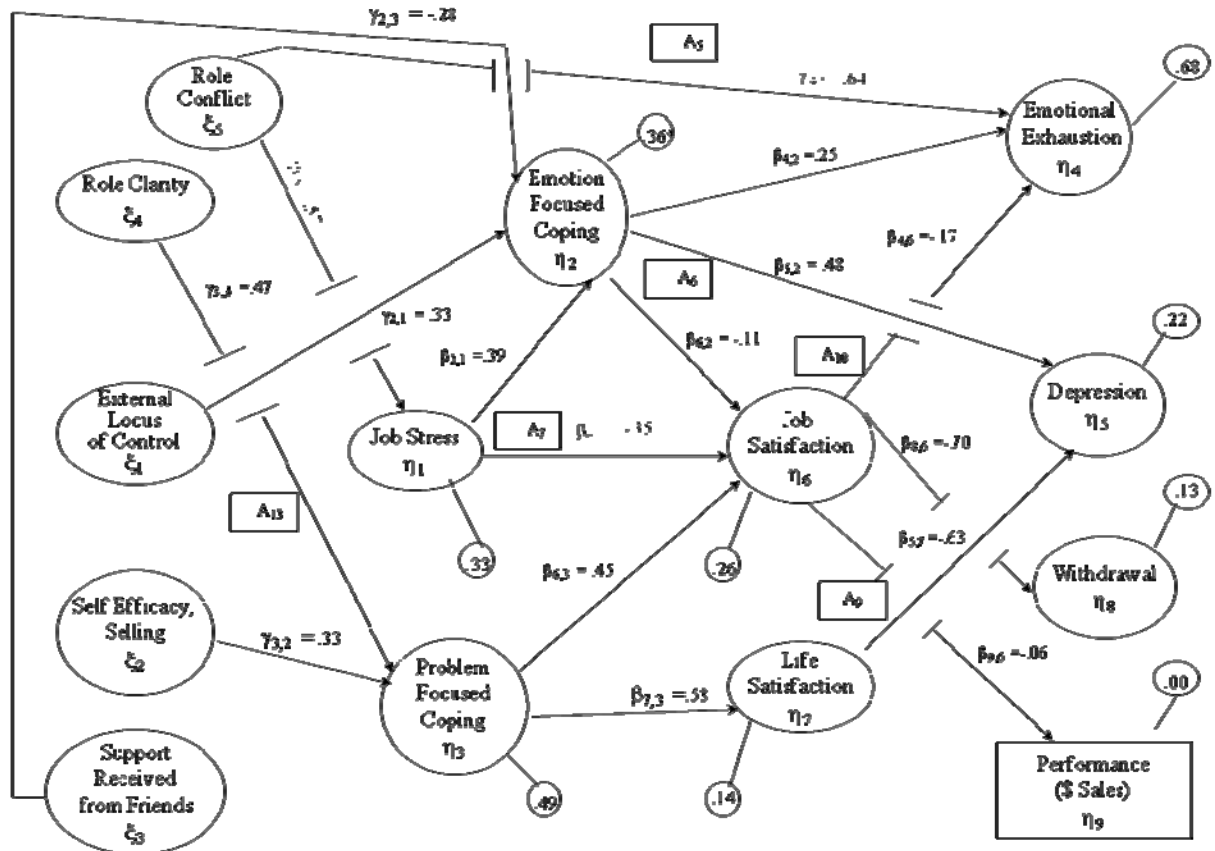


Figure 2. Trimmed model

Note. Numbers in circles represent squared multiple correlations for Constructs.

6. Discussion

The proposed model of determinants and outcomes of salespeople’s coping style was developed and analyzed in light of the need to advance knowledge regarding how salespeople cope with chronic job stress. Separate networks of determinants and outcomes exist for PFC and EFC. Use of PFC appears to be facilitated by a clearer understanding of one’s job role (increased role clarity), along with a higher level of confidence in one’s job skills (self-efficacy). Furthermore, PFC has a direct impact on job and life satisfaction. Salespeople’s use of EFC apparently is driven by an external focus along with seeking support from friends and coworkers. Also, job stress arising from perceived role conflict contributes to use of EFC. EFC, moreover, conduces to burnout, depression, and job dissatisfaction.

6.1 Contribution to Theory

The proposed model was designed and tested to improve the basis for estimating how salespeople’s coping efforts relate to several known environmental determinants, job attitudes, and psychological outcomes. As such, the study advances comprehension of job stress and coping in a sales setting. The findings build on what is known and extend the basis for framing a research agenda targeted towards understanding coping in the sales force and other boundary spanner environments.

A key rationale for executing the investigation was that generalizing from research conducted in the coping literature to the sales force context can be problematic and somewhat dubious (owing to distinct differences between sales personnel and other kinds of employees). Low controllability and predictability inherent in a sales job can escalate uncertainty concerning effort and performance; such phenomena are less prevalent in non-sales settings. Indeed, sales researchers have mentioned the difficulty of transferring extant measures of coping to the selling arena (e.g., Strutton & Lumpkin, 1993; 1994; Strutton, Pelton, & Lumpkin, 1995).

6.2 Managerial Implications

PFC reflects the practice of problem solving in a sales force environment. PFC conduces to positive outcomes. If

contributes to job satisfaction and to life satisfaction. Life satisfaction relates negatively to depression. Job satisfaction decreases withdrawal intentions. These linkages infer that PFC promotes job satisfaction and well-being and enhances retention. As such, sales managers would be judicious to develop a phased sales training curriculum that builds salespeople's capacity for problem solving. This staged sales training would afford sales managers opportunity to assess salespeople's level of self-efficacy at problem solving as the skill builds.

Salespeople, however, need to be convinced of the benefits of utilizing PFC—particularly if they practice EFC. Use of PFC appears to extend beyond the sales transaction and into other aspects of work and life in general. Several tactics may be used to impel the salesperson to employ PFC. A manager or trainer can set the stage by ensuring that salespeople understand more readily their responsibilities, progress toward goals, and role in the organization. The enhanced role clarity gained should abet adoption of PFC. Also, sales training that allows salespersons to enhance efficacy beliefs concerning their selling skill set should aid utilization of a problem-oriented approach for coping. The self-efficacy→PFC usage dynamic may account for success ascribed to SPIN and similar cognition-oriented approaches to selling (Rackham, 1988). SPIN enacts a problem-driven approach to selling.

Salespeople should also learn about dysfunctional job reactions, such as projection of blame, escapism, and other externally-oriented tactics reflective of EFC and their adverse consequences. EFC promotes job dissatisfaction, emotional exhaustion, depression, and (indirectly) intentions to withdraw. Tactics such as seeking solace from friends, attributing failure to outside sources such as the economy, competitors, or others in the same organization, and belief in conflicting goals and counter-purposes of others (role conflict), although realistic, also contribute to EFC, and thus to negative outcomes.

EFC should be supplanted by PFC. Accordingly, the manager or trainer could follow a diagnostic protocol. The protocol may include, but is not limited to, the following steps: (1) observe and discuss how a salesperson accounts for failures; (2) determine how a salesperson perceives influences in his/her work domain; (3) ascertain how a salesperson diffuses chronic anxiety that accompanies the job; and (4) discern whether job situations themselves foster use of EFC as opposed to PFC.

Conceivably, someone who seeks to help a salesperson cope more effectively might initially attempt to help the individual clarify job objectives (gain role clarity) and then bolster self-efficacy beliefs concerning job objectives. Reinforcing salespeople's self-efficacy by helping them learn more about trends in an industry and about what needs drive customers' purchasing behavior may lessen external orientation and thus enhance use of PFC.

6.3 Limitations and Future Research

The study reflects limitations attributable to the sample, method of data collection, and instrumentation. Any extension of study findings must be guarded because the salespeople studied were employed by a single company over a window of time. The self-report measures are subject to respondent interpretation, halo, and other types of bias. Such problems are particularly acute with coping. Respondent recall may be inaccurate (Cooper et al., 2001). Furthermore, stability of coping-related behaviors within an individual is probably uncertain.

Coping needs to be defined more precisely. A standard definition of it, as well as of coping styles, needs to be developed. As study findings reflect, coping measures require further development. The measure of EFC is problematic, as composite and alpha reliabilities reflected. Whether such reliability indicates measurement error or relates more to the difficulty of capturing dimensions of coping cannot be determined. The deductively-developed measures may not apply particularly well to a sales context. Dewe (2000) argues for context-specific measures inductively developed.

Oakland and Ostell (1996) observe that the frequency of practicing a type of response set commonly used to measure coping styles should be compared to the utility of a behavior-type response set. Certainly, qualitative study—through either direct observation or depth interviews of how salespeople cope—offers a starting point for developing models and context-specific measures of coping styles.

Findings indicate that role clarity promotes PFC and that role conflict fosters job stress and emotional exhaustion. Other trait variables (or core self-evaluation constructs) could be studied relative to job stress and coping style. Future stress and coping models should incorporate individuals' control beliefs—a complement to self-efficacy (Karasek, 1979). Conceivably, salespersons may possess strong belief in their ability, yet perceive the job as lacking uncertainty and controllability. For instance, in cases such as product recalls, salespeople face

a high demand, low control job situation.

Examining whether the foregoing perceptions escalate PFC or job stress or whether they lessen stress and enhance use of PFC would be beneficial. Likewise, an individual's estimation of his/her employment of knowledge and skills possessed—competence (Sandberg, 2000)—should be measured and incorporated into a schema intended to explain how stress is managed. Also, the non-work domain could be integrated into subsequent theoretical models of job stress and coping (i.e., to what extent does use of PFC at work influence perceptions of work-family conflict?).

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Appendix: Measurement Items

1) Role Clarity (House & Rizzo, 1972)

- (i) I feel certain about how much authority I have.
- (ii) Clear, planned goals and objectives exist for my job.
- (iii) I know that I have divided my time properly.
- (iv) I know what my responsibilities are.
- (v) I know exactly what is expected of me.
- (vi) Explanation is clear of what has to be done.

2) Role Conflict (House & Rizzo, 1972)

- (i) I have to do things that should be done differently.
- (ii) I receive an assignment without the manpower to complete it.
- (iii) I have to buck a rule or policy in order to carry out an assignment.
- (iv) I work with two or more groups who operate quite differently.

- (v) I receive incompatible requests from two or more people.
- (vi) I do things that are apt to be accepted by one person and not accepted by others.
- (vii) I receive an assignment without adequate resources and materials to execute it.
- (viii) I work on unnecessary things.

A Likert-type response format was employed for both role stress measures:

1=Very inaccurate 5=Very accurate

3) Social Support (Turner et al., 1983)

We would like to know something about your relationship with other people. Please read each statement below and decide how well the statement describes you. For each statement, show your answer by indicating to the left of the item the number that best describes how you feel. The number represents the following answers:

1= Very much like me

2= Much like me

3= Somewhat like me

4= Not very much like me

5= Not at all like me

- (i) When I'm with my friends, I feel completely able to relax and be myself.
- (ii) I share the same approach to life that many of my friends do.
- (iii) No matter what happens, I know that my family will always be there for me should I need them.
- (iv) When I want to go out to do things I know that many of my friends would enjoy doing these things with me.
- (v) I have at least one friend I could tell anything to.
- (vi) People who know me think I am good at what I do.
- (vii) I feel very close to some of my friends.
- (viii) My friends would take the time to talk over my problems, should I ever want to.
- (ix) Even when I am with my friends I feel alone.

4) Selling Self Efficacy (Chowdhury, 1993)

- (i) I am good at selling.
- (ii) It is difficult for me to put pressure on a customer. (R)
- (iii) I know the right thing to do in selling situations.
- (iv) I find it difficult to convince a customer that has a different viewpoint than mine. (R)
- (v) My temperament is not well-suited for selling. (R)
- (vi) I am good at finding out what customers want.
- (vii) It is easy for me to get customers to see my point of view.

1=Strongly disagree 5=Strongly agree

5) Work Locus of Control (Spector, 1988)

- (i) A job is what you make of it.
- (ii) On most jobs, people can pretty much accomplish whatever they set out to accomplish.
- (iii) If you know what you want out of a job, you can find a job that gives it to you.
- (iv) If employees are unhappy with a decision made by their manager, they should do something about it.
- (v) Getting the job you want is mostly a matter of luck.
- (vi) Making money is primarily a matter of good fortune.
- (vii) Most people are capable of doing their jobs well if they make the effort.
- (viii) In order to get a really good job you need to have family members or friends in high places.

- (ix) Promotions are usually a matter of good fortune.
- (x) When it comes to landing a really good job, who you know is more important than what you know.
- (xi) Promotions are given to employees who perform well on the job.
- (xii) To make a lot of money you have to know the right people.
- (xiii) It takes a lot of luck to be an outstanding employee on most jobs.
- (xiv) People who perform their jobs well generally get rewarded for it.
- (xv) Most employees have more influence on their managers than they think they do.
- (xvi) The main difference between people who make a lot of money and people who make a little money is luck.

1=Strongly disagree 5=Strongly agree

6) Job Induced Anxiety (House & Rizzo, 1972)

- (i) My job tends to directly affect my health.
- (ii) I work under a great deal of tension.
- (iii) I have felt fidgety or nervous as a result of my job.
- (iv) If I had a different job, my health would probably improve.
- (v) Problems associated with my job have kept me awake at night.
- (vi) I have felt nervous before attending meetings with my sales manager.
- (vii) I often take my job home with me in the sense that I think about it when doing other things.

1=Strongly disagree 5=Strongly agree

7) Problem-Focused Coping (Latack, 1986)

- (i) I get together with my managers to discuss the situation which caused stress.
- (ii) I talk with people who are involved in the situation which caused stress.
- (iii) I devote more time and energy to my job.
- (iv) I try to work more efficiently.
- (v) Decide what I think should be done and explain this to the people who are affected.
- (vi) I come up with several solutions to the problem.
- (vii) I make a plan and follow it.
- (viii) I take things one step at a time.
- (ix) Give my best effort to do what I think is expected of me.
- (x) I am inspired to do something creative.
- (xi) I think about how a person I admire would handle the situation and use that as a model.
- (xii) I work on changing policies which caused this situation.

Almost Never				Almost Always
1	2	3	4	5

8) Emotion-Focused Coping (Latack, 1986)

- (i) Avoid being in the situation if I can.
- (ii) I accept the situation because there is nothing that can be done.
- (iii) I remind myself that work is not everything.
- (iv) I take it out on family or friends by getting angry at them.
- (v) I hope a miracle will happen.
- (vi) I try to forget the whole thing.

- (vii) I try to find new faith to believe in.
- (viii) I avoid being with people in general.
- (ix) I refuse to believe that it has happened.
- (x) Have fantasies about how things would work out.
- (xi) I say to myself that this is not real.

Almost Never			Almost Always	
1	2	3	4	5

9) Depression (Well-Being) (Costello & Comrey, 1967)

- (i) I feel that life is worthwhile.
- (ii) I wish I had never been born.
- (iii) I feel that there is more disappointment in life than satisfaction.
- (iv) My future looks hopeful and promising.
- (v) Things have worked out well for me.
- (vi) When I look back I think life is good for me.
- (vii) When I wake up in the morning I expect to have a miserable day.
- (viii) I want to run away from everything.
- (ix) When I get up in the morning I expect to have an interesting day.
- (x) Living is a wonderful adventure for me.
- (xi) I am a happy person.
- (xii) The future looks so gloomy that I wonder if I should go on.
- (xiii) I feel that life is drudgery and boredom.
- (xiv) I feel blue and depressed.

Absolutely Not	Definitively Not	Possibly	Definitely	Absolutely
1	2	3	4	5

10) Emotional Exhaustion: (Singh, Goolsby, & Rhoads, 1994)

- (i) Working with customers is really a strain for me.
- (ii) I feel I am working too hard for my customers.
- (iii) Working with my sales manager directly puts too much stress on me.
- (iv) I feel emotionally drained by the pressure my sales manager puts on me.
- (v) I feel frustrated because of working indirectly with other employees.
- (vi) I feel I work too hard trying to satisfy other employees.
- (vii) I feel dismayed by the actions of top management.
- (viii) I feel burned out from trying to meet top management's expectations.

1=Strongly disagree 5=Strongly agree

11) Job Satisfaction, six items adapted from Brayfield and Rothe (1951)

- (i) I find real enjoyment in my job.
- (ii) I like my job better than the average worker does.
- (iii) I am seldom bored with my job.
- (iv) I would not consider taking another job.

(v) Most days I am enthusiastic about my job.

(vi) I feel fairly well satisfied with my job.

1=Strongly disagree 5=Strongly agree

12) Satisfaction with Life Scale (Diener et al., 1985)

(i) In most ways my life is close to my ideal.

(ii) The conditions of my life are excellent.

(iii) I am satisfied with my life.

(iv) So far I have gotten the important things I want in life.

(v) If I could live my life over, I would change almost nothing.

1=Strongly disagree 5=Strongly agree

13) Withdrawal (adapted from Hom & Griffeth, 1991)

(i) During the next six months, I intend to search for another full-time job.

(ii) I intend to leave this division during the next six months.

(iii) I fit in at Company name.(R)

(iv) I regularly think about quitting my job.

(v) Thoughts of quitting seldom cross my mind.(R)

1=Strongly disagree . . . 5=Strongly agree

If you ever decided to quit your sales job, what are the chances you would quit without having accepted an alternative job offer first?

What are the chances that you will search for an alternative job within a year?

1= 0% chance, 2 = 20% chance, 3=40% chance, 4=60% chance, 5=80% chance, 6=100% chance.

(i) I have searched for another job since I joined this sales organization.

(ii) I have found a better alternative than my present job if I want it.

(iii) I am exerting a great deal of effort searching for an alternative job.

1=Very false . . . 5=Very true

Note

Note 1. For brevity, the following statistics (and their concomitant tables) were omitted but are available from the third author: item covariance matrix, descriptive statistics, and squared multiple correlations for the 46 indicators used to measure the model constructs; lambda X matrix item loadings for the measurement model; Phi (correlation) matrix for the thirteen study constructs and the performance index; and alpha reliabilities for the summary measures and reliabilities calculated using the composite indices created to identify the constructs in the partial disaggregation model (Bagozzi & Heatherton, 1994). The measures exhibited reasonable reliability. PFC and EFC reliabilities were similar to those reported by Smith and Sulsky (1995). Also, the measurement model suggested stability across the forty-six indicators used to tap model constructs.

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