Why Perceived Barriers to Career Advancement are Important
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Finding and retaining high performing salespeople continues to be the #1 challenge for most sales organizations. Organizational commitment has garnered considerable attention regarding the sales role because of its impact on job satisfaction and sales force turnover. Also, in the context of personal selling, the positive relationship between organizational commitment and performance has been found to be stronger for salespeople than for non-sales employees (Jaramillo, Mulki, and Marshall 2005).

Organizational commitment can 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 identification includes a salesperson’s broad adoption and support of a company’s principles and objectives. Furthermore, committed individuals possess “a willingness to exert considerable effort on behalf of the organization,” and “a strong desire to maintain membership in the organization” (Mowday, Steers, and Porter 1982, p. 27).

As an individual, how committed are you to your organization? If you are, why? If you are not, what would management need to do to gain your commitment?

Given the important role that organizational commitment plays, researchers continue to seek a better understanding of both its causes and consequences.

This article introduces the concept of psychological contracts related to perceived barriers to career advancement. Furthermore, the consequences of perceived barriers to career advancement such as organizational commitment and job satisfaction will be discussed. This article will also provide real estate professionals an opportunity to reflect on the relationship they currently have with their own organizations, as well as give managers insight regarding how they might improve the organizational commitment they are experiencing with their sales force.
Psychological Contracts, Perceived Barriers to Career Advancement, and Organizational Commitment

Rousseau (1990) concluded that career advancement is a key aspect of an employee’s psychological contract with his/her organization. Psychological contracts exist based on an employee’s beliefs or perceptions regarding reciprocal obligations involving their organizations (Rousseau 1989). These contracts are unwritten and deviations from the contracts are generally perceptual. According to these contracts, employees believe that if they exert considerable effort in their jobs that their organizations should provide commensurate advancement opportunities for the individual. When employees perceive that barriers exist to career advancement, the psychological contract has been broken. Accurate or not, perceptions of a broken psychological contract have been found to negatively impact job attitudes (Kickul 2001; Robinson and Rousseau 1994).

In the current study, a composite score was used to measure perceived barriers to career advancement based on an individual’s perceptions regarding:

- Membership in informal networks within their organization
- Culture fit between the individuals and their work environments
- Mentoring offered by their organizations

High performing employees rely on organization networks, which are dynamic and continually developing. While there are both formal and informal company networks, research shows top performing employees are those who understand and rely on the influence received from participating in informal networks (Armstrong 2003) with such membership being associated with higher compensation, better performance evaluations, and career advancement (Cross and Thomas 2008). In a study of female executives, it was found that they consider networking to be an important approach for breaking through the proverbial glass ceiling (Ragins et al. 1998).

A large body of literature has focused on the concept of “fit” including person-team (group) fit, person-vocation fit, and person-job fit (Kristof 1996). Our focus is limited to person-organization fit, which relates to an individual’s perceptions of how well he/she fits the corporate culture. Research has shown that correspondence or fit between an individual and his/her environment, i.e., company culture is associated with positive psychological consequences (Lopez, Babin, and Chung 2009).

In the sales context, mentoring is defined 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 et al.
Mentoring relationships offer benefits such as friendship, exposure, and visibility, confirmation, counseling, and protection (Fine and Pullins 1998).

In the context of the broadcasting industry (television stations), we surveyed 241 account executives (salespeople), as well as managers and asked them to report on their perceptions regarding perceived barriers to career advancement. Additionally, respondents reported their level of satisfaction with their jobs and organizational commitment.

Findings

Our findings indicate that perceived barriers to career advancement are negatively related to sales employee’s organizational commitment. In other words, the more sales employees believe they are not part of the informal network, do not fit the culture of the company, and are not receiving adequate mentoring, the less committed they are to their organization. Our findings also show that this negative relationship becomes stronger as employee tenure increases. Thus, the organizational commitment of highly tenured sales employees diminishes even more than the commitment of newer sales employees when they perceive barriers to their career advancement. This is important given increased organizational commitment decreases turnover intentions and job performance among sales professionals (Jaramillo, Mulki, and Marshall 2005).

Furthermore, we found that the more sales employees believed they were encountering perceived barriers to career advancement, the less satisfied they were with their job. Past research has reported the less satisfied people are with their job, the less committed they are to their organization (Pettijohn, Pettijohn, and Taylor 2007) and the less committed they are to their organization, the lower their performance (Jaramillo, Mulki, and Solomon 2006).

How Do Perceived Barriers to Career Advancement Differ Across Sales Roles?

While the current study focused on sales employees in the broadcasting industry where advancement opportunities exist, this will not hold for all organizations. Many sales agents work in a flat organization where advancement opportunities into management do not exist. Even if advancement opportunities do exist, some may not have an interest in moving out of sales because they believe they can earn a better income as an agent and they enjoy the autonomy of the sales role.

However, should you be considering a move to another organization, this article should open your eyes to some new ideas. If you are employed in a large brokerage firm that offers advancement opportunities, findings from this study should be of interest to you, as well. Furthermore, if you are currently in a managerial role, you should be able to pick up some valuable ideas that may be of use in your current role.
Implications for Real Estate Agents

Findings from the current study can be used by individual agents, as well as among managers within an organization.

Agent Implications

If you are considering accepting a position in another brokerage firm, whether it be to remain in an agent role or to move into management, we recommend you:

• Inquire about what management in this organization does to integrate new employees into informal networks

• Strive to gain information about the new organization’s culture, such as values and reflect on how well you match this environment

• Ask this organization’s management what formal mentoring programs are currently in place to help employees be successful

Managerial Implications

If you are a manager within a brokerage firm and would like to increase your agent’s commitment to your organization, we recommend you consider the following actions:

• Strive to incorporate sales employees into informal networks through enhanced corporate communications, as well as during initial and on-going training sessions. Furthermore, make an effort to include sales employees in social events and informal interactions on and off the job

• Make every effort to provide a complete and realistic description of what life is like in the job and the organization to increase fit between sales employees and the firm during recruiting. It is all about managing expectations and it is better to promise less and deliver more than the reverse

• Evaluate your organization’s mentoring program and identify ways that it can be improved. Seek feedback from your agents regarding their perceptions of your mentoring program and attempt to incorporate their recommendations where possible. Strive to offer a formal mentoring program that matches mentors with protégés that are similar in attitudes, compared to only focusing on similar demographics in order to enhance protégé organizational commitment (Brown, Zablah, and Bellenger 2008)

The Bottom Line

In conclusion, researchers continue to seek a better understanding of the causes of organizational commitment. This article has shown that perceived barriers to career advancement decrease
organizational commitment and job satisfaction. The sooner that organizations recognize this issue and bring employees into informal networks, strive to develop a good fit between the organization and current/prospective agents, and develop and implement an effective mentoring program, the sooner it will experience higher employee satisfaction and organizational commitment, leading to improved performance.

References


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