

Perceptions and Attitudes of Salespeople towards the Overall Sales Job and the Work Itself

Some Preliminary Findings

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Introduction

Among marketing mix variables it is contended that personal selling is perhaps the most flexible and effective competitive tool for most companies. More specifically, and from an economic point of view, salespeople in every organization occupy a unique role as revenue producers. They are constantly reminded of their responsibility to achieve high and “healthy” levels of sales, thus securing their company’s survival and growth. From the behavioural aspect alone they must be able to deal effectively with customers who may have different business experiences or different social, cultural and educational backgrounds. Thus, in attempting to achieve organizational goals they have to adjust their behaviour whenever necessary. Clearly this requires additional effort in order critically to evaluate individual sales situations and properly assess the type of behaviour that is needed.

The fact that salespeople are generally free from direct supervision implies that they have to be committed and self-motivated in order to work to their fullest capacity. Research findings suggest that employees committed to their organizations perform better than employees who are not[1,2]. In addition, commitment to an organization has been found to have significant influences on salespeople’s attitudes and behaviour[3,4].

However, issues such as commitment, motivation, job satisfaction or, more precisely, “how to get the most out of salespeople”, have not yet been fully explored or adequately answered[5]. Consequently, practising managers’ scepticism about the applicability and effectiveness of different models of solving these problems is understandable. Sales managers’ negative attitudes towards different motivational approaches have been expressed by Whyte [6, p. 455] in the following way:

Typically, it has consisted of lengthy exposure to the motivational theories of Maslow, Herzberg and others. In such sessions, almost everything presented is either theory or unrelated to the field manager’s business and the realities of their organisations’ cultures and policies. So nothing really changes.

Salespeople’s motivated behaviour and subsequent performance is, unquestionably, conditioned by many variables. For example, it has been widely recognized that salesforce behaviour and performance are influenced by many organizational factors[7]. Such factors include the role of sales management with regard to performance feedback, compensation methods, leader consideration and power base of managers, to name but a few[8-16]. A different source of influence is related to the degree of compatibility between the individual salesperson and the nature of the sales task. This means that salespeople need to operate under diverse situations and play different roles while performing their tasks[17].

Given the importance of the compatibility between the individual salesperson and the sales task, and the significance of organizational influences in relation to behaviour, the purpose of this article is threefold. First, to identify the degree of fit between salespeople and the task characteristics of their job; second, to examine salespeople's perceived importance of several work-related aspects; and third, to examine and compare salespersons' responses towards anticipated fulfilment or non-fulfilment towards several work-related aspects and self-evaluations of present levels of job satisfaction, motivation, and performance.

The Study

This study was field-based and exploratory in nature. Data were gathered from a convenient (purposive) sample of 170 salespeople in northern Greece. The obtained data were used to investigate:

- (1) the degree of fit between salespeople and the task characteristics of the sales job;
- (2) the different importance weightings attached to various work-related aspects; and
- (3) whether fulfilment towards several work-related outcomes, to the extent that they would prefer, had been anticipated or not anticipated and their likely perceptions of satisfaction, motivation and performance.

The sample consisted of companies trading in four major sectors, namely: food, brewing and distilling, chemicals and pharmaceuticals, and insurance. A number of companies which did not fall into any of these clearly identifiable sectors formed an additional group which was termed miscellaneous and consisted of firms whose main businesses were ceramics, electrical, apparel, agricultural machinery and furniture manufacture.

Structured interviews were used as a data-gathering medium and a questionnaire was designed and administered. Questioning pertained to the issues which have been addressed above. One-hundred-and-fifty (88.2 per cent) of the salespeople were male and 20 (11.8 per cent) were female.

Salespeople and Task Characteristics of the Sales Job

According to Dubinsky *et al.*[18, p. 192], the sales job has numerous unique characteristics. These characteristics are:

- “Salespeople are physically, socially and psychologically separated from other line and staff personnel...
- Salespeople must be flexible and innovative because of the nature of their job.

- The selling job puts the salesperson in a boundary role position...
- Salespeople play multiple roles...
- Selling necessitates persistence and self-motivation...
- Generally the selling situation is filled with uncertainty and interpersonal conflict; some thoughts...
- Many selling jobs produce delayed results from the salesperson's effort..."

The extent to which a sales job, with all its particular and unique characteristics, reflects the interests of an individual may determine the degree of his/her commitment and integration with the organization of which he/she is part. When such commitment is being expressed by constant attendance (psychological and emotional rather than physical) and concern, then the behavioural requirements of the individual salesperson can be met. According to Katz and Kahn[19], “Role set is the set of roles with which a person interacts by virtue of occupying a particular position”.

Individual salespersons already in selling know their roles, but this is not enough from an organization's point of view. What is of equal importance is the degree to which what they actually do corresponds to what they would really like to do.

Review of the literature has led to the conclusion that knowledge of the expected behaviour of salespeople, pertaining specifically to their work, is an essential requirement to a selling organization and has an impact on various facets of the overall job[20-23]. In order to examine different relationships that are central to that knowledge, the following sales-related characteristics were empirically tested:

- negotiating with customers;
- being sociable;
- adjusting to different role requirements;
- having risk associated with performance;
- receiving salary only;
- receiving commission only;
- receiving salary and commission; and
- spending considerable time working away from an office.

Generally, pay systems among selling organizations vary considerably[24-26]. For example, among the most widely known systems of payment which have been developed and used are: straight salary; straight commission; and salary and commission.

Due to the importance of compensation in selling and to the conventional wisdom that pay is

one of the primary motivators, the way this variable is used may determine, to a certain degree, salesforce motivation and performance. Consequently, participants were asked to indicate their optimal choices of these three remuneration packages.

Based on a five-point scale, the like/dislike responses to specific sales-job characteristics turned out to be informative. A large number of salespeople were shown to dislike being compensated by straight salary (89.4 per cent) while a comparatively smaller number of individuals, but still more than half (69.4 per cent), disliked the "commission only" remuneration package. Clear preference was shown for the "salary and commission" method which was favoured by 91.8 per cent. This preference can be largely explained when interpreted with the high percentage of salespeople (88.2 per cent) who disliked the risk associated with their performance.

A clear preference towards liking was evident for the remainder of the sales task characteristics. An important indication concerning the requirement of "being sociable" emerged, showing that a significant percentage of salespeople (97.7 per cent) enjoyed this particular sales characteristic. This preference is in accordance with the task of negotiating with customers, where 97.6 per cent of the sample responded favourably (see Table I).

The fit between individuals and the degree to which they like specific sales job characteristics was found to be very high, the only exception being the negative responses to the variable "risk with performance". Most participants asserted that performance levels had been their primary concern, but the existence of too many uncontrollable factors made it highly unpredictable. Factors mentioned included: economic conditions, company's policies (that is,

credit period allowed to customers, discounts offered, advertising campaigns to back up sales) and competition.

Salespeople and Work-related Aspects

Salespeople participating in this study also provided information about the degree of importance they attached to a set of work-related aspects. The purpose of obtaining this information was to identify important factors which could possibly be related with likely parameter interpretations for considering work behaviours. Progress in the identification of different importance weightings could possibly reveal a baseline indication as far as the direction of preferences is concerned, and its relationship with the relative specificity of job-related expectations. Thus, salespeople were asked to express the degree of importance that certain work-related aspects were perceived to have. Importance was measured on a five-point scale ranging from "not at all important" to "extremely important". Their responses are summarized in Table II.

The data presented in Table II show that all work-related aspects were considered as having an important weighting for the majority of the sample. A more accurate measurement could possibly have been achieved if, for example, each participant had been given a choice from 15 numbers (1-15), 1 corresponding to most important and 15 to least important, each of which had to be assigned to one aspect only. Given this alternative procedure the classification which could have emerged for each individual would have been biased since the expression of undifferentiated perceptions in importance between different aspects would be conditioned to an imperative ranking.

From the above findings, it can be seen that those aspects which have acquired more weighting in terms of importance are:

	Dislike it a lot		Dislike it		Not sure		Like it		Like it a lot	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Negotiate with customers			1	0.6	3	1.8	66	38.8	100	58.8
Adjust to different role requirements	3	1.8	19	11.2	17	10.0	73	42.9	58	34.1
Being sociable			2	1.2	2	1.2	54	31.8	112	65.9
Risk with performance	99	58.2	51	30.0	4	2.4	13	7.6	3	1.8
Get salary only	85	50.0	67	39.4	7	4.1	9	5.3	2	1.2
Get commission only	49	28.8	69	40.6	14	8.2	24	14.1	14	8.2
Get salary and commission	5	2.9	5	2.9	4	2.4	54	31.8	102	60.0
Spent considerable time out of office	15	8.8	13	7.6	19	11.2	82	48.2	41	24.1

Table I.
Salespeople's Responses towards Liking or Disliking Specific Sales Tasks

	Not at all important		Moderately important		Important		Very important		Extremely important	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
(1) Recognition					9	5.3	37	21.8	124	72.9
(2) Good working conditions			1	0.6	7	4.1	39	22.9	123	72.4
(3) High earnings					11	6.5	36	21.2	123	72.4
(4) Good relationship with employees					15	8.8	32	18.8	123	72.4
(5) Management's concern			1	0.6	12	7.1	36	21.2	121	71.2
(6) Good relationship with management			1	0.6	16	9.4	41	24.1	112	65.9
(7) Well co-ordinated job			1	0.6	13	7.6	49	28.8	107	62.9
(8) Opportunities for promotion			2	1.2	17	10.0	47	27.6	104	61.2
(9) Responsibilities					20	11.8	57	33.5	93	54.7
(10) Performance feedback			1	0.6	23	13.5	54	31.8	92	54.1
(11) Role clarity			2	1.2	26	15.3	51	30.0	91	53.5
(12) Participation in decision making					27	15.9	58	34.1	85	50.0
(13) Authority					31	18.2	66	38.8	73	42.9
(14) Autonomy			2	1.2	36	21.2	63	37.1	69	40.6
(15) Performance standards	11	6.5	16	9.4	50	29.4	51	30.0	42	24.7

Table II.
Degree of Importance for Different Related Aspects

- recognition (1);
- good working conditions (2);
- high earnings (3);
- good relationships with other employees (4); and
- management's concern (5).

In contrast, those aspects with a relatively lower importance weighting were judged to be:

- performance feedback (10);
- role clarity (11);
- participation in decision making (12);
- authority (13);
- autonomy (14); and
- performance standards (15).

The remaining aspects ranged between these two broadly defined clusters. Several features from these responses which have relevance to some of the more general issues with which this study is concerned, are now discussed.

The findings provide support for the assumption that salespeople are able to distinguish between several work aspects based on their relative degree of importance. Since all work-related aspects were found to be of importance, the different importance weightings associated with each provides a basis for uncovering priorities of fulfilment for particular outcomes. Therefore it can be said that salespersons' decisions concerning what behaviour should be employed at the workplace

may be the result of either of two levels of fulfilment or non-fulfilment estimations:

- (1) estimations of fulfilment or non-fulfilment of outcomes resulting from all work aspects; or
- (2) estimations of fulfilment or non-fulfilment of only a few work aspects.

If the first assumption is true, then the task of sales managers in influencing behaviour must address all work-related aspects with the same attention and care, so that "fulfilment to be anticipated and reached" can be perceived by salespeople. However, if the second assumption holds true, then some work-related outcomes must be more carefully treated than others. A careful consideration should be extended to the priority of preferences to which conditions for fulfilment must be established. This is not to say that aspects with less importance weightings need not be fulfilled. Contrariwise, an approach of parallel fulfilment facilitation for all aspects is necessary to strengthen perceived inter-dependences among outcomes if it is to be regarded as effective.

The following example clarifies this statement.

Assume that a salesperson has two dominant important targets at the workplace; first, to be promoted and second, to achieve higher earnings. Promotion is perceived to be interrelated to management's concern and having good relationships with management. A relationship between high earnings and performance standards is also perceived. Several differently perceived constructs of interrelationships may be present in

each individual salesperson. The two dominant targets (expectations) are central and have self-luminous importance and value, whereas those related to the two target outcomes are peripheral aspects and have hetero-luminous importance and value.

By looking at different work outcomes and their relative importance, the prediction of dominant expectations seems to be possible. If attributions of importance are analysed to decompose specific constructs of interrelationships, this may lead to some causal inferences concerning directional determinants of behaviour which will be individual and time specific. Consequently, a powerful precondition in identifying the importance and value of different work-related aspects emerges. That is, a continuous scan of an individual's estimates and preferences of future directions at all levels is necessary, worked back to take in perceived requirements for particular behaviours. This process will provide information which will improve the validity of prediction. This process is not considered here since it was not within the scope of this study.

Commenting on the work-related aspects which were found to be important in this study, it should be noted that a hierarchy of preferred outcomes has not been, nor should it be, linked or related to any of those important aspects in a straightforward way. Unless the procedure which was mentioned earlier is employed, valid conclusions cannot be drawn.

Work-related Aspects and Anticipated Outcomes

Having addressed the importance of different work-related facets of salespeople we now look at the relationship between anticipated fulfilment or non-fulfilment of the same set of aspects. More specifically, salespeople were asked to indicate whether they thought that fulfilment to the extent they would prefer has been anticipated or not.

The purpose of obtaining this information was to spell out the limitations (if any) of applied management practice and, at a later stage, to make causal inferences by comparing this information with responses concerning perceived present levels of actual job satisfaction/dissatisfaction, motivation and performance. A nominal scale was used for responses, providing the choice of either "fulfilment is anticipated" or "fulfilment is not anticipated".

It is interesting to note that salespeople's responses provided a clear indication of anticipated fulfilment to the extent that they would prefer. The aspect "good relationship with other employees" had the highest number of positive responses (92.4 per cent), whereas the

variable "participation in decision making" had the lowest (56.5 per cent). The rest of the work-related aspects range between these two extremes (see Table III).

There are two important considerations that should be made at this stage of analysis. First, the perceived quality of the job context from which the individual salesperson seeks to gain satisfaction, and second, the attitudes deriving from an individual's perceptions for anticipated fulfilment or non-fulfilment of several work-related aspects. On the one hand, the job that salespeople occupy, as it has been indicated from their responses to sales job characteristics (see Table I) and anticipated outcomes (see Table III), seems to have the quality of inspiring a relative strength of confidence in their occupational choice. On the other hand, if the degree of organizational involvement and level of satisfaction and motivation of salespeople is to be determined by feelings and perceptions of anticipated fulfilment or non-fulfilment, then their responses appear to be consistent with a significant potential of positive outcomes for their anticipations. That is, since anticipation has been found to be related to fulfilment rather than non-

	Anticipated		Not anticipated	
	N	%	N	%
(1) Good relationships with other employees	157	92.4	13	7.6
(2) Good relationships with management	154	90.6	16	9.4
(3) Recognition	147	86.5	23	13.5
(4) Responsibilities	146	85.9	24	14.1
(5) High earnings	146	85.9	24	14.1
(6) Good working conditions	144	84.7	26	15.3
(7) Management's concern	144	84.7	26	15.3
(8) Well co-ordinated job	142	83.5	28	16.5
(9) Performance feedback	140	82.4	30	17.6
(10) Role clarity	137	80.6	33	19.4
(11) Performance standards	130	76.5	40	23.5
(12) Authority	119	70.0	51	30.0
(13) Opportunities for promotion	116	68.2	54	31.8
(14) Autonomy	110	64.7	60	35.3
(15) Participation in decision making	96	56.5	74	43.5

Table III. Salespeople's Responses towards Anticipated Fulfilment to the Extent that They Would Prefer, and Anticipated Non-fulfilment

fulfilment, it is very likely that, if these aspects correspond to positive anticipation of targeted outcomes, promising essentials for satisfaction and motivation must be present for a large number of salespeople.

Some interesting trends can be revealed by examining the first two aspects with the highest positive responses; that is, “good relationships with other employees” (92.7 per cent) and “good relationships with management” (90.6 per cent). The number of positive answers indicates that salespeople were very confident in relation to “anticipated fulfilment” in outcomes where they perceived themselves as active contributors capable of influencing development in a given direction, rather than towards aspects with which they perceived they had less direct involvement and influence.

Thus far, information regarding salespeople’s perceptions and attitudes has been concerned with: how salespeople fit into the sales job; the importance weightings of various work-related aspects; and whether or not fulfilment of several work outcomes, to the extent that they would prefer, had been anticipated.

These data have been acquired and presented for the purpose of highlighting relevant aspects of the problem area of satisfaction and motivation. Decomposition of the problem structure has provided support for a fundamental statement; that is, different importance weightings of the manipulated work-related outcomes indicate the existence of a hierarchy to which preferences for fulfilment may, after careful investigation, be possibly linked.

Perceived Behavioural Outcomes

The final piece of information that salespeople provided concerned actual satisfaction or dissatisfaction levels from their current jobs, along with their perceived levels of motivation and performance. The frequencies provided by these measurements were analysed and compared with those regarding anticipated fulfilment to the extent that they would prefer, or non-fulfilment, for the same set of work-related aspects. The purpose of this information was to try to arrive at some conclusions about the consistency in responses.

Since subjects’ responses to the question containing probability estimates of anticipated fulfilment or non-fulfilment (see Table III) have established a comprehensive pattern of positive ratings, that means the responses to be examined here must match their assessed response distribution specified earlier. Proportionately, the frequency of positive responses in the former manipulation was found to be significantly higher than that of negative responses (that is, almost 80-

20). Before going any further it should be noted that the comparison features the responses of each individual salesperson and the absolute proportions of frequency in both manipulations.

Table IV presents the frequency of responses for job satisfaction, motivation and performance of salespeople. The proportions of ratings in each variable are almost identical with those obtained in the previous question for anticipated fulfilment or non-fulfilment in a number of work-related aspects. That is, the proportion in frequency of responses towards anticipated fulfilment to the extent that it would have been preferred provides a relatively consistent proportional clustering with regard to the level of satisfaction/dissatisfaction that is currently experienced together with present motivation and performance levels.

Out of the aggregated 20 per cent of salespeople who perceived non-fulfilment in several job-related aspects, a large proportion (ranging from 17 per cent satisfaction/dissatisfaction, 17 per cent performance and 19 per cent motivation) had claimed dissatisfaction, and low motivation and performance levels. This indicates that the effects of framing conditions such as anticipated fulfilment or non-fulfilment are salient when determining behaviour at the workplace.

Conclusions

Salespeople in this study provided information which was concerned with their perceptions and attitudes towards: the task characteristics of their job; the various work-related aspects; the perceived anticipated outcomes regarding fulfilment to the extent they preferred or non-fulfilment of several work-related aspects; and perceived current levels of (dis)satisfaction, motivation and performance.

First, salespeople’s attitudes towards a specific set of sales-related task characteristics were found to be mainly positive. With regard to alternative payment schemes, the most preferred compensation method was a combination of a salary and commission. For the remainder of the sales task characteristics, they have indicated a strong preference, the only exception being “risk with performance”. These findings reveal a relatively high degree of fit between salespeople and the specific characteristics of their jobs.

Second, information concerning the degree of importance that salespersons attached to a set of work-related aspects has been obtained in order to identify possible targeted outcomes and job expectations (for example, linkages between perceived importance and likely preferences and priorities in terms of fulfilment). The majority of the sample assigned an above-average

Frequency of responses								
Satisfaction/dissatisfaction ^a	ED	VD	D	NS	S	VS	ES	Total
		5	9	19	84	38	15	170
Motivation ^b	VL	L	QL	M	QH	H	VH	Total
		1	3	22	60	60	24	170
Performance ^a		2	5	29	54	61	19	170
<i>Where:</i>								
ED = extremely dissatisfied	VL = very low	<i>Note:</i>						
VD = very dissatisfied	L = low	^a Proportion approximately 80 to 20						
D = dissatisfied	QL = quite low	^b Proportion approximately 85 to 15						
NS = not sure	M = medium							
S = satisfied	QH = quite high							
VS = very satisfied	H = high							
ES = extremely satisfied	VH = very high							

Table IV.
Salespeople's Responses Concerning Present Level of Job Satisfaction/Dissatisfaction, Motivation and Performance

“importance” weighting to all job-related aspects. However, the different weightings indicate that salespeople assigned different degrees of importance to different work-related aspects. Therefore, by taking into consideration their pattern of importance rating, the foundations for hierarchical cognitive classifications can be established.

Third, the relationship between anticipated fulfilment or non-fulfilment to the extent that salespersons would prefer and the set of work-related aspects was investigated. The findings revealed that salespeople have anticipated fulfilment to the extent they would prefer for most of the work-related aspects. Providing that perceived anticipated fulfilment is an antecedent state of purposeful and goal-oriented behaviour, it appears that essential components for motivated behaviour can be identified.

The conceptualization of anticipated fulfilment and non-fulfilment has presupposed a cognitive structuring that influences behavioural outcomes. The reason for manipulating these two broad cognitive outcomes (for example, anticipated fulfilment and non-fulfilment) as sole predictors of behavioural intentions is that previous research findings have failed to identify any specific variable as a major determinant of job satisfaction, motivation or performance of salespeople[5].

Finally, salespeople have indicated their degree of present level of (dis)satisfaction, motivation and performance. These responses were analysed and compared with those concerning expectations of fulfilment. The pattern of responses in both manipulations appeared to be consistent. For example, when fulfilment of important aspects

has been anticipated, salespeople consider themselves to be relatively satisfied, motivated and performing well. Contrariwise, when anticipation of fulfilment of important aspects was absent feelings of dissatisfaction, along with perceptions of low motivation and performance levels, were expressed.

The findings in this study provide evidence of a high degree of synergy between salespeople, their task characteristics and several work-related aspects. Furthermore, by dichotomizing the dimensions of anticipated outcomes in terms of fulfilment and non-fulfilment, a framework is provided for further investigating the antecedents of behavioural intentions of salespeople. The findings reported in this study should be treated as tentative rather than conclusive and considered as an early step in a direction that needs additional research.

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