

DO GENDER AND AGE REALLY MATTER IN DIRECT SELLING? AN EXPLORATORY INVESTIGATION

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This study was designed to explore to what extent direct salesperson gender and age influence work attitudes and outcomes. Data were collected from a direct selling sales population. Results indicate that female salespersons demonstrated a much greater degree of job commitment and satisfaction than male salespersons. Female salespersons also perceived organizational climate more favorably and attached a greater importance to available job outcomes. No significant differences were, however, found with regard to their job performance and the perceived importance of income and career growth outcomes. With regard to age as a predictor variable, older salespersons were found to be more committed and satisfied with their jobs than younger salespersons.

INTRODUCTION

Sales forces include persons with a wide variety of demographic characteristics. This is especially true in direct selling, in which the opportunity to become a salesperson is open to persons with any and all backgrounds and demographic characteristics. Not all persons enter direct selling for the same reasons, however (Wotruba and Tyagi 1992), and these variations in work motivations lead to differences in work attitudes and outcomes. If these attitude and performance differences can be associated with apparent or measurable characteristics of the salespeople, policies involving motivation, supervision, and other sales management activities can be developed and applied more effectively to make sales organizations more productive. Demographic characteristics such as age and gender are apparent and measurable characteristics of salespeople, and the main purpose of this paper is to determine if gender and age influence work attitudes and outcomes in direct selling. Any such relationships

found could then become useful to help managers devise and target personnel policies (e.g., motivational and training programs) more specifically.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The research on examining the role of demographic variables on work attitudes and outcomes is somewhat limited in the sales management literature. Ford et al. (1987) summarized the findings with regard to performance by drawing a general conclusion that demographic characteristics as predictors of sales performance have produced mixed results. A number of studies in the organizational behavior discipline, involving non-sales populations, have investigated the relationships between demographics and organizational outcomes in addition to performance. These studies and a few meta-analyses suggest various possibilities of relationships between salesperson gender, age, and work attitudes and outcomes.

Gender

In a number of theoretical explanations, regarding gender and work behavior, it is maintained that

female employees' job performance and attitudes are significantly influenced by stressors such as sex-role conflict and work place discrimination (Deaux 1984; Noe 1988; Schul and Wren 1992). Huber (1982) argues, for example, that women's traditional sex-role socialization has emphasized the primacy of domestic roles over careers. Thus, more pressure is placed on women than men to fulfill their roles within the family before taking on the additional responsibilities associated with their job (Bhagat and Chassie 1981). Such orientation has predisposed women to aspire to low achievement jobs, and has equipped them with behavior patterns that are inappropriate for successful vocations. Expectations involving sex-role conflict are found less frequently among men, who are generally more comfortable with their masculine role at work and home (Hammer and Tosi 1974). To the extent that a female salesperson experiences internal conflict over family roles and career duties (e.g., travel, public relations), she may be unable to carry out her organizational role. This, in turn, may lead to reduced job satisfaction and organizational commitment (Churchill et al. 1985). Some empirical studies have shown an inverse relationship between sex-role conflict and job satisfaction and commitment (Bielby and Bielby 1984; Koberg and Chusmir 1987).

With regard to job performance, Swan and Futrell (1978) asked industrial sales managers to evaluate male and female sales personnel on ten job aspects such as sales ability, territory coverage, product knowledge, activity reporting, and overall performance. The results indicated that salesmen were rated significantly better than saleswomen on nine of the ten dimensions. However, Busch and Busch (1978) found no significant differences between the performance of male and female sales personnel, when using a self-rating scale. A pro-male bias is seen particularly in job environments requiring aggressive interpersonal behavior (e.g., industrial selling) (Comer and Jolson 1985; Swan et al. 1984). Such discriminatory attitudes could significantly affect a female salesperson's job satisfaction and work performance.

In recent years, there are some indications that suggest that the environment and factors that influence women salespersons' performance negatively may be lessening. First, women's role in the workforce is increasingly becoming widespread and acceptable. Social values regarding women working outside the home are changing. This has reduced sex-role conflict for women salespersons (Koberg and Chusmir 1987). Such lessening of conflicting expectations between family and career responsibilities is likely to lead to the female salesperson evaluating her job and organizational climate much more positively (Schul and Wren 1992). Secondly, personal selling jobs these days are placing more emphasis on relational skills (e.g., communication based on empathy, client problem solving) (Churchill, Ford, Walker 1990). Such characteristics are generally more in line with the personality traits and behaviors of women than those of men (O'Leary 1974). Consequently, the role of women in personal selling is likely to be valued more in professional sales organizations. This, in turn, should increase the experienced job satisfaction and performance of female salespersons. Finally, recent changes in the legal environment and aggressive non-discriminatory hiring practices have encouraged more women to enter in the field of personal selling occupation (Fugate, Decker, and Brewer 1988). Today's sales force has become much more integrated, thus, reducing the adverse effects of "tokenism". The factors such as preferential treatment that originate from tokenism have been shown to negatively influence women's job attitudes.

Age

Waldman and Avolio (1986) conducted meta-analyses on 40 samples that included data pertaining to the relation between age and job performance. Samples were classified into three categories according to the types of performance measures used in prior research: (a) supervisory ratings, (b) peer ratings, and (c) individual productivity. Results across samples showed a pattern of increases in performance, as measured by productivity increase, at higher ages. Conversely, supervisory ratings showed a slight

tendency for performance to be lower for older employees.

One theoretical explanation for how age should relate to job performance may be seen in the developmental psychology literature. Labouvie-Vief and Chandler (1978) and Cribben, Schaie, and Parham (1980) present a theoretical framework of "contextualism" to explain how individual ability and motivation to perform tasks can change over the life span. Such contextual factors as prolonged job boredom, experienced meaningfulness of work, and lack of intellectual stimulation may lead to performance decrements on the part of older employees. On the other hand, job performance may be retained or even strengthened for older employees who are allowed to take on new and challenging roles, for example, the mentoring of younger salespeople (Feldman and Weitz 1988; Keenan 1989).

Another theoretical rationale for the hypothesis of a negative relationship of age to performance is available in the so-called "decremental theory of aging" (Giniger, Dispenzieri, and Eisenberg 1983). This theory is based on extensive laboratory investigations showing that abilities such as dexterity, speed of responses, agility, hearing, vision, and so forth, decline with age. Eight of the nine abilities measured by the General Aptitude Test Battery (GATB), for example, have been shown to be correlated negatively with age, though the aptitudes vary depending on at what age the decline begins (Droege, Crambert, and Henkin 1963). Furthermore, empirical work has demonstrated that ability is strongly and causally related to job performance (Schmidt, Hunter, and Outerbridge 1986). A combination of the above types of evidence leads to prediction that job performance will decline with age.

However, not everyone subscribes to the view that the relationship between age and job performance is inverse. Many economists, for example, expect experienced (hence, older) workers to be more productive and have attributed the declining rate of productivity growth in the 1970s at least partially

to the rapid influx of younger "baby-boom" workers into the work force (Zell 1979).

Some empirical studies also suggest that older employees actually have lower absenteeism, turnover, illness, and accident rates, higher job satisfaction, and more positive work attitudes than younger workers (Rhodes 1983). However, studies of the relationship between age and performance, per se, are not as clear. In a qualitative review of 25 studies, Rhodes (1983) found approximately equal support for each of the four possible age-performance relationships: negative, positive, curvilinear ("inverted U"), and nonsignificant.

The objective of this study is to explore the following issues:

1. Are there significant differences based on the gender of direct salespeople with respect to job performance, job satisfaction, and job commitment?
2. How do male and female direct salespersons differ in terms of their preferences for job outcomes and rewards?
3. Do male and female direct salespersons perceive their organizational climate differently? If so, in what way?
4. Do direct salespeople differ in terms of the above criteria based on the age factor?
5. Do gender and age interact to influence any of the above criterion variables?

METHOD

Sample and Data Collection

Names and addresses of salespeople from all sections of the U.S. were provided by four participating direct selling companies. This population of salespeople was selected for study because direct selling firms use no exclusionary criteria regarding age, gender, or any other biographical characterization which might restrict the variance in the variables, thereby biasing the sample and the results. A total of 1,600 questionnaires with postage-paid return envelopes

were mailed, generating responses from 491 (31% response rate).

Variables

Importance of job outcomes was measured with a list of 26 job characteristics similar in nature to the list used by Wotruba and Tyagi (1991) in their study of met expectations. Respondents were asked to rate "how important to you personally" is each of the characteristics on the list using a seven-point scale anchored from 7 = "extremely important" to 1 = "not important."

Job characteristics items were subjected to a factor analysis using a varimax rotation (see Table 1). Components with eigenvalues greater than 1.0 were rotated (Tatsuoka 1971). As shown in Table 1, five major factors emerged, with each item assigned to the factor for which it had the highest loading. Factor loadings ranged from a low of 0.41 for "proud company associations" to 0.80 for "offers work hours I want." Except for a few moderate loadings, most items loaded quite strongly on their assigned factors. The five resulting factors were named as follows: Factor 1, social recognition and organizational identification; Factor 2, income and career growth; Factor 3, attention and approval; Factor 4, personal fulfillment and job challenge; and Factor 5, autonomy and control. Most of these factors had some similarity to important reasons why people become direct salespeople as found in an earlier Direct Selling Association study (Harris 1977). This similarity reflects on the appropriateness of the factors extracted in this study.

Organizational commitment was measured using a fifteen-item Organizational Commitment Questionnaire (OCQ) developed by Porter et al. (1974). A number of studies in sales management (Still 1983; Ingram, Lee, and Skinner 1989; Johnston et al. 1987; Sager and Johnston 1989) have employed this same measure. In the present study each item was rated on a seven-point scale anchored by "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree."

Job satisfaction was measured using ten items from the job satisfaction subscales of the Job Diagnostic Survey (JDS) developed by Hackman and Oldham (1974, 1975). The JDS subscales have been used successfully to measure job satisfaction in a variety of studies including some specifically in a sales setting (Becherer, Morgan, and Richard 1982; Tyagi 1985; Wotruba 1990). The ten items involved seven-point rating scales ranging from "extremely dissatisfied" to "extremely satisfied."

Performance was measured with seven self-rated items modeled after the performance measurement scale by Behrman and Perreault (1982). In the current study, however, some slight modifications were made in the items to reflect more precisely the nature of the direct selling job. These changes resulted from discussions with executives in the sponsoring firms as well as two focus groups of direct salespeople completed prior to the development of the questionnaire. Respondents were promised anonymity and asked to rate their performance rather than their ability via this instruction: "How satisfied are you with the results you are achieving up to today on each of these seven activities: planning and goal setting, locating new potential customers, sales presentations and demonstrations, recruiting new salespersons, meeting with supervisors, follow-up after the sale, and administration." Five-point scales were used, anchored by 5 = "completely satisfied" and 1 = "not at all satisfied," with intermediate positions labeled as "only slightly satisfied," "somewhat satisfied," and "mostly satisfied."

A questionnaire developed by Jones et al. (1977) was slightly modified to fit the sales job situation and was used to measure the perceived organizational climate. Items were carefully selected to correspond with the existing job situation. Five climate dimensions salient to the current sales population were selected (Table 2) and each was measured with a number of Likert-type items. The scores on all items for each dimension were aggregated to obtain organizational climate dimension scores. The descriptive characteristics of all the variables used in this study are given in Table 2.

TABLE 1
Factor Analysis of Importance of Job Characteristics

Job Characteristics	Loadings on Factor				
	1	2	3	4	5
21. Earn special awards or recognition	<u>.70</u>	.30	.15	.07	.09
19. Develop selling skills	<u>.67</u>	.34	.08	.18	-.01
26. Go to conventions	<u>.66</u>	.14	.28	.06	.03
20. Gaining respect of salespersons	<u>.61</u>	.19	.41	.16	.11
24. Selling highly competitive products	<u>.60</u>	.02	.09	.16	.30
17. Opportunity to make friends	<u>.51</u>	.01	.08	.27	.23
22. Work with others on a team	<u>.51</u>	.09	.42	.16	.04
1. Proud company association	<u>.41</u>	.22	.09	.29	.01
10. Advanced opportunities	.16	<u>.77</u>	.11	.13	.01
6. Opportunity for high income	.11	<u>.74</u>	.12	.11	.18
3. Professional growth	.16	<u>.72</u>	.22	.22	-.17
11. Success depends on effort	.38	<u>.50</u>	.08	.31	.12
14. Earnings will be predictable	-.18	<u>.46</u>	.44	.10	.45
7. Success relates to initiative	.18	<u>.42</u>	.18	.15	.07
15. Support from supervisors	.20	.09	<u>.76</u>	.05	.06
18. Appreciation from supervisors	.29	.21	<u>.71</u>	.10	.01
12. Show I can handle responsibilities	.03	.17	<u>.65</u>	.23	-.09
25. Job with high prestige	.38	.06	<u>.47</u>	.20	.07
5. Feelings of self-fulfillment	.28	.11	.17	<u>.79</u>	-.04
2. Feelings of accomplishment	.10	.26	.20	<u>.68</u>	.01
16. Increase my self-esteem	.34	.02	.35	<u>.66</u>	.01
13. Job uses skills I have	.03	.23	.09	<u>.56</u>	.18
9. Can be creative and innovative	.29	.35	-.06	<u>.51</u>	.08
4. Offers work hours I want	.06	.12	-.01	-.06	<u>.80</u>
8. Freedom to do the job as I wish	.36	-.01	-.11	.15	<u>.60</u>
23. Job with minimal rejection	.34	-.03	.37	.16	<u>.48</u>

Descriptors assigned to each factor are: Factor 1, social recognition and organizational identification; Factor 2, income and growth; Factor 3, attention and approval; Factor 4, personal fulfillment and job challenge; Factor 5, autonomy and control. The items assigned to each factor are indicated by underlined loadings.

TABLE 2
Criterion Variables

Dimension	Description	Number of items	Alpha
Organizational Commitment (OC)	The extent to which an individual identifies with organizational goals, values organizational membership, and intends to work hard to attain the overall organizational mission.	15	0.92
Job Satisfaction (JS)	The extent to which a salesperson is satisfied with different aspects of the job.	10	0.95
Leader Goal Emphasis and Work Facilitation (LGEWF)	The leader's emphasis on high standards of performance and his/her behavior that helps goal attainment.	9	0.86
Leader Trust and Support (LTS)	The extent to which an individual has feelings of trust and confidence in a supervisor and to which supervisor is aware of and responsive to the needs of subordinates.	6	0.81
Leader Interaction Facilitation (LIF)	The leader's behavior that encourages the development of close, mutually satisfying relationships within the group.	3	0.89
Organizational Identification (IDENTI)	The degree to which a salesperson feels the organization provides a vehicle for development and accomplishment of personal skills, goals, and rewards.	6	0.96
Management Concern and Awareness (MCA)	The extent to which management attempts to assess and respond to its salespersons' needs and problems	5	0.92

ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

To assess the internal consistency of the measures used in the research, Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficients were calculated for all the criterion variables. Reliability estimates for criterion variables varied from 0.81 for leader trust and support to 0.96 for organizational identification. Since reliability estimates of 0.60 or above are considered sufficient for early stages of research (Nunnally 1967), measures used in this study can be regarded as sufficiently reliable.

Gender Related Differences

Table 3 shows the t-values and significance levels of gender difference in relation to different job related variables. Results indicate that significant differences were found between male and female salespersons in terms of their job satisfaction and organizational commitment. However, differences in relation to job performance were not significant. In general, female salespersons showed higher mean scores for job satisfaction, commitment, and

performance. The largest difference was observed for the job satisfaction scores, where female salesperson's showed much greater satisfaction with their job (mean=50.50) than male salespersons (mean=42.43). The nonsignificant differences for job performance seem to be consistent with findings in the organizational behavior literature where performance differences based on gender have remained inconclusive.

Similar results were also found concerning the importance of job outcomes. Significant differences were found between male and female salespersons for all types of job outcomes except for income and career growth. Again, in general, female salespersons attached a greater importance to a variety of job outcomes. The greatest difference was found for social recognition and organizational identification factors to which female salespersons attributed a much greater importance. Similarly, autonomy and job control were regarded as substantially more important by female as compared to male salespersons.

TABLE 3
T-values of Gender Differences in Relation to Work Attitudes and Outcomes

Dependent Variables	Number of Items	Mean Male	Values Female	t-value	Significance Level
Job Performance	14	19.23	20.34	1.30	NS
Job Satisfaction	10	42.43	50.50	4.10	0.001
Job Commitment	7	54.00	57.30	2.06	0.040
<u>Importance of Job Outcomes/Rewards</u>					
Social Recognition and Organizational Identification	8	37.29	41.34	3.98	0.001
Income and Career Growth	6	35.67	35.60	-0.41	NS
Attention and Approval	4	20.43	21.40	1.98	0.050
Personal Fulfillment and Job Challenge	5	28.35	29.76	2.41	0.010
Autonomy and Control	3	14.84	17.26	5.15	0.001
<u>Perception of Organizational Climate</u>					
Leader trust & support	6	22.05	25.03	4.03	0.001
Leader goal emphasis and work facilitation	9	34.31	37.01	3.10	0.003
Leader interaction and facilitation	3	10.61	11.51	2.59	0.011
Organizational identification	6	19.83	23.35	4.38	0.001
Management concern and awareness	5	16.85	19.85	4.79	0.001

TABLE 4
F-Values for Age Differences in Relation to Work Attitudes and Outcomes

Dependent Variables	Number of Items	F Value	Signif Level	Mean Values for Age Group				
				18-24	25-29	30-34	35-44	45-54
Job Performance	14	3.636	0.006	55.83	56.36	57.99	58.96	63.03
Job Satisfaction	10	2.948	0.020	48.26	50.33	50.40	51.96	57.43
Job Commitment	7	0.842	0.499	19.58	20.98	20.21	20.27	21.06
<u>Importance of Job Outcomes/Rewards</u>								
Social Recognition and Organizational Identification	8	0.856	0.490	40.72	41.56	39.36	40.86	41.51
Income and Career Growth	6	1.196	0.312	36.23	35.72	35.25	35.39	34.63
Attention and Approval	4	1.338	0.255	21.84	21.09	20.83	20.54	21.39
Personal Fulfillment and Job Challenge	5	0.977	0.419	29.85	29.97	28.83	29.59	29.49
Autonomy and Control	3	0.897	0.465	16.71	17.00	16.69	17.41	16.80
<u>Perceptions of Organizational Climate</u>								
Leader trust and support	6	2.622	0.032	23.35	25.22	24.67	25.82	25.00
Leader goal emphasis and work facilitation	9	2.299	0.020	35.55	36.58	36.30	38.65	36.62
Leader interaction and facilitation	3	1.882	0.113	11.07	11.07	11.30	12.25	11.35
Organizational identification	6	6.117	0.000	21.01	23.09	22.78	24.83	24.65
Management concern and awareness	5	4.919	0.001	18.21	19.62	19.33	20.92	20.35

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T-values in Table 3 also show the differences between male and female salespersons with regard to their organizational climate perceptions. Results indicate that female salespersons viewed organizational climate much more positively than male salespersons. All the differences were statistically significant ($p < .05$).

Age Related Differences

However, age did not show any significant impact on job performance. The mean values indicate that generally older salespeople demonstrated a greater job commitment and experienced greater job satisfaction than did younger ones.

Analysis of variance results (Table 4) show that a salesperson's age was not related to the importance they attached to various job outcomes. None of the F-values met the $p < .05$ significance criteria. These results seem to be inconsistent with some of the findings in organizational behavior studies where younger employees show a greater importance for income oriented rewards and older employees show a preference for social recognition type of job outcomes.

The ANOVA results for the relationships between age and organizational climate perceptions show that all but one (leader interaction facilitation) F values were significant ($p < .05$). Mean scores show that, in general, older salespersons viewed organizational climate more favorably than younger salespersons. Age showed the greatest influence on organizational identification, indicating that the older the salesperson the more he/she identified with the organization.

A Post-hoc Look at the Gender and Age Interactions

To gain some additional insights, the moderating role of age on gender and work attitudes was examined by looking into gender and age interactions.

TABLE 5
Significant Interactions Between Predictor Variables

Interacting Predictor Variables	Dependent Variable	F value	Significance Level
Gender x Age	Autonomy & Control	2.575	0.037
Gender x Age	Job Satisfaction	5.142	0.001

Among all the interactions examined between gender and age of salespersons and criterion variables only two interactions produced significant F values (Table 5). One of these interactions showed a significant impact on job satisfaction and the other on the importance attached to the factor job autonomy and control. The corresponding mean values indicate that older female salespersons were much more likely to be satisfied with their job and to attach a much greater importance to job autonomy and control than younger male salespersons.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study are encouraging as they suggest a number of meaningful conclusions. First, in general, female salespersons demonstrated a much greater degree of job commitment and satisfaction than male salespersons in direct selling. A similar trend was found with regard to organizational climate perceptions and importance attached to various job outcomes. Female salespersons perceived various dimensions of organizational climate much more favorably and attached a greater importance to available job outcomes.

On two of the key criterion variables, however, no significant differences were found between male and female salespersons. These variables were job performance and importance of income and career growth outcomes. In other words, both male and female salespersons performed equally well and attached similar importance to income and career growth opportunities. These results are consistent

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with previous findings from organizational behavior where no significant differences between male and female employees were observed.

With age as a predictor variable, significant differences were observed in organizational commitment and job satisfaction. Older salespersons, in general, were more committed and satisfied with their jobs than younger salespersons. However, the age variable did not seem to have any effect on salespersons' performance. Mean performance scores showed that salespersons in different age groups performed equally well. Age also did not show any significant effect on the desirability of various job outcomes such as income and career growth, social recognition, and job autonomy. These results do not appear to be in line with some of the previous findings in organizational behavior where younger employees seemed to prefer income and professional growth oriented rewards whereas older employees showed preferences for social recognition and personal fulfillment types of rewards. These differences could be due to the selection of a specific population of salespeople in this study. Generally, the age variable showed positive relationships with the organizational climate dimensions. These findings indicated that the older the salesperson the more favorably he/she perceived various aspects of organizational climate.

Furthermore, there was some indication that both gender and age interact to influence job satisfaction and the desirability of job autonomy and control. Older female salespersons are most likely to be satisfied with their direct selling job than younger male salespersons, who are least likely to be satisfied.

It is important to consider some limitations with the present study which future studies should attempt to resolve. As the sample used in the present study is by no means representative of the sales population in different industries, generalizability of results can be questioned. One has to consider the results in the light of specific organizational programs and environment. More replicative studies in different personal selling settings would

be helpful to examine the generalizability of present findings.

In future studies, the relationships between demographic characteristics and organizational behavior can be examined in the light of potential moderating variables. There is a possibility that variables such as work experience, education, and marital status moderate relationships involving gender and age with job satisfaction, performance, and commitment. The role of age variable as a surrogate for experience and maturity in influencing job behavior can also be examined.

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