

THE ROLE OF PERCEIVED EQUITY AND JUSTICE IN MANAGING THE MODERN SALES FORCE

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People have been concerned about equitable and just treatment for thousands of years. Salespeople are no exception. Perceptions of equity can affect a salesperson's attitudes and behaviors. The present study investigated the role perceptions of equity and justice play in a salesperson's organizational commitment and intent to seek new employment. Results suggest that the higher-order needs of promotion, recognition, and incentives equity were most important to a salesperson's organizational commitment and intent to turnover. Additionally, contrary to previous research, distributive (outcomes based) justice was found to be more important to a salesperson's organizational commitment and intent to turnover than procedural justice. The unique nature of outside sales may best explain this contrary finding. Implications of the above findings for sales managers are also discussed.

INTRODUCTION

It was the venerable philosopher Sally (Charlie's little sister) from the Peanuts gang who said, in the now classic television show *A Charlie Brown Christmas*, "All I want is what I got coming to me, all I want is my fair share" when discussing her hopes for Christmas. People have been concerned about equitable and just treatment for thousands of years. The parable of the landowner in Matthew 20 clearly illustrates this point.

When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, 'call the workers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last ones hired and going on the first.' The workers who were hired about the eleventh hour came, and each received a denarius. So when those came who were hired first, they expected to receive more. But each one of them also received a denarius. When they received it, they began to grumble against the landowner. 'These

men who were hired last worked only one hour,' they said, 'and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the work and the heat of the day' (Matthew 20:8-12).

Because of this enduring concern for equitable treatment, considerable theory and research has been conducted to help us better understand the influence perceptions of equity and justice have on people's attitudes and behavior. Despite this intense interest on equitable treatment, very few studies have examined how perceptions of equity and justice affect salespeople's attitudes and behavior (for examples see Dubinsky and Levy 1989; Livingstone, Roberts and Chonko, 1995). For many organizations, the sales force is the key to their success. For these firms, effective management of their sales force is critical to remaining a viable entity in an increasingly competitive environment.

In addition to the important role salespeople play in many organizations, the unique nature of the sales position suggests that generalizing earlier findings regarding perceptions of equity and their influence on behavior and attitudes may be tenuous at best. In particular, outside salespeople (those salespeople who sell at the customer's place of business) occupy

very unique positions and have received little research scrutiny. It is likely that salespeople's perceptions of equity and justice differ from those of other employees because they are often paid on commission rather than straight salary. Outside salespeople may also view equity differently than other salespeople. They are likely to have more personal contact with salespeople from other organizations which gives them a greater opportunity to gather relevant information regarding equity perceptions. Thus, it is important to examine outside salespeople's perceptions of equity in an effort to ascertain how salespeople's perceptions of equity impact their job-related attitudes and behaviors.

How a salesperson perceives he or she is treated relative to others can impact important sales outcomes. The present investigation examines how perceptions of equity and justice impact a salesperson's organizational commitment and intent to turnover (seek new employment). Both of these sales outcomes are critical to effectively managing a sales force.

The costs associated with sales force turnover are substantial – recruiting and training new salespeople as well as the opportunity costs that result when a sales territory is left open and revenue is lost. The typical training period for new salespeople is 3.6 months at an average cost of \$7,937. Sales force turnover rates vary from industry to industry and firm to firm, but research has found industry sales force turnover rates as high as 46 percent annually with an average turnover rate of 14.1 percent across industries (Dartnell's 29th *Survey of Sales Force Compensation 1996-97*). Although some turnover is beneficial – functional turnover (the departure of low performing salespeople), the loss of productive salespeople is an expensive proposition, up to \$40 thousand per salesperson (McNeilly and Goldsmith 1991).

The existence of functional turnover places even more importance on the effective management of sales force turnover. Since poor performing salespeople typically choose to quit more often than better performers (Bycio et al. 1990; McEvoy and Cascio 1987), this means that employee turnover

frequently has positive consequences for companies if they can replace the low performing salespeople with better performing salespeople (Hollenbeck and Williams 1986). What is needed is a more complete understanding of the factors which affect a salesperson's decision to seek new employment.

In like fashion, the concept of organizational commitment has important consequences for a selling firm. Commitment has been linked to performance (Brett et al. 1995), union effectiveness (Cohen 1993), organization citizenship behavior (Shore and Wayne 1993), involvement with professional activities (Meyer et al. 1993), lower tardiness, fewer accidents, and fewer grievances (Rhodes and Steers 1981). Additionally, managerial perceptions of employee commitment have been found to be positively correlated with assessments of employee management potential and promotability (Shore, Barksdale, and Shore 1995). Strutton et al. (1995) found that highly committed salespeople were more likely to use problem-focused coping strategies which involves using tactics such as taking responsibility, self-control, efforts at self-improvement, or analytical efforts to solve the problem causing the stress. Less committed salespeople were found to use more emotion focused coping strategies which involve attempts to reduce or eliminate the emotional distress associated with the stress-inducing event which could include distancing oneself or outright escape from the stressful situation.

This investigation seeks to clarify the links between facets of equity and organization commitment and sales force turnover in firms employing outside sales personnel. In the pages that follow, this analysis will:

Provide a brief discussion of the concepts of perceived equity and justice.

Investigate the relative importance of six facets of internal and external equity on the sales outcomes of organization commitment and intent to turnover. This study includes internal and external equity measures of raises, fringe benefits, promotion

opportunities, incentives, salary and recognition.

Investigate the importance of internal procedural and distributive justice on a salesperson's organizational commitment and intent to turnover.

Discuss the managerial implications of the above analyses.

Equity Theory

The concept of equity as proposed by Adams (1963, 1965) states that people look at others in a social setting and compare their own inputs and the outcomes that they receive to the inputs and outcomes of their comparison others. If the individual perceives that his/her ratio of inputs to outcomes received is similar to that of their referent(s), equity exists in the mind of the individual. Inequity is described as the distress an individual feels in the form of anger and/or resentment when the subject is under-compensated and in the form of guilty feelings when the recipient is overcompensated. If the situation is perceived as inequitable, an attempt at discrepancy reduction will be made. This attempt may take the form of cognitive actions to change the perceived input/output of self and/or referent(s). It may result in behavioral changes that increase or decrease the subject's inputs or cause a change in received outcomes. This distress may be reduced by acting on another person, or changing the comparison referent. Finally, if the tension or distress is great enough, the individual may choose to seek new employment. The perceived level of equity can also affect a person's organizational commitment.

One form of equity, internal equity, is concerned with the individual's perceptions of the fairness of their rewards relative to their coworkers. Within organization comparisons of rewards have been found to be important to individuals in a number of studies (Livingstone, Roberts, and Chonko 1995). A second form of equity, external equity, refers to the perceived fairness of one's rewards relative to other individuals' awards in outside organizations. Norms of fair pay exist and salespeople and other employees

frequently compare their rewards with the rewards of those in other organizations based on those norms.

METHODOLOGY

Scales

Internal and External Equity

The present study uses a 15- item scale designed to measure internal equity and a 12- item scale to measure external equity. Each scale addressed perceived fairness in regard to recognition, incentives, raises, salary, fringe benefits, and promotions. See Figure 1 for a listing of the questions used to assess internal equity across the six identified dimensions. These six reward categories are considered important motivators and have been used in previously published research on salespeople (Chonko, Tanner and Weeks 1992). Figure 2 identifies the same six reward dimensions, but the scales are cast from an external equity perspective. Responses for both scales were recorded on 7-point Likert scales which ranged from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree".

Procedural and Distributive Justice

Internal Procedural Justice (IPJ) is concerned with the perceived fairness (equity) of the *procedures* used to make resource allocation decisions. The 6- item scale was constructed for the present study by tapping items from the internal equity scale that measured procedural aspects of equity (items 5-9 and 15). The scale exhibited good internal consistency, alpha for the present study was .87.

Internal Distributive Justice (IDJ) taps the perceived fairness (equity) of the *outcomes* (rewards) received. The nine items of the IDJ scale which measure perceived outcome equity were selected from the internal equity scale (items 1-4 and 10-14). The scale exhibits good internal consistency, alpha for the present study was .83.

FIGURE 1
Internal Equity Scale Items

Internal Equity	X	S.d.
Internal Raise Equity	5.29	1.70
1. My raises are fair considering the raises others in this organization receive		
Internal Fringe Benefit Equity	16.9	3.5
2. My fringe benefits are not fair compared to what my co-workers make		
3. Considering what my co-workers receive, my fringe benefits are about right		
4. My fringe benefits are comparable to the fringe benefits of others in this company		
Internal Promotion Equity	9.4	2.9
5. When considering the promotion opportunities of others in this company, my promotion opportunities are not fair		
6. My promotion opportunities are fair compared to those of my co-workers		
Internal Incentive Equity	9.2	3.5
7. I feel I am given a fair opportunity to receive incentive awards		
8. I receive the same opportunity as my peers to participate in incentive programs		
9. I am not treated fairly given the incentive awards others receive		
Internal Salary Equity	16.3	4.2
10. My pay is fair given what my co-workers make		
11. My pay is fair compared to the pay of others in this company		
12. All in all, my annual salary is not fair considering what my co-workers get		
Internal Recognition Equity	15.9	3.5
13. My recognition is fair considering the recognition others in this organization receive		
14. The recognition I receive is fair given what my co-workers receive		
15. All in all, I am not recognized fairly considering the recognition others receive		

FIGURE 2
External Equity Scale Items

External Equity	X	S.d.
External Raise Equity	9.4	3.2
1. Better raises are provided by other companies in my industry		
2. My raises are fair compared to raises provided by other firms		
External Fringe Benefit Equity	9.5	3.2
3. Other companies in my industry have better fringe benefits than this one does		
4. My fringe benefits are fair compared to fringe benefits in other firms		
External Promotion Equity	9.4	2.9
5. Other companies in my industry provide better promotion opportunities		
6. My promotion opportunities are fair compared to promotion opportunities in other firms		
External Incentive Equity	9.2	3.5
7. Other companies in my industry provide better incentive awards		
8. My incentive awards are fair compared to incentive awards in other firms		
External Salary Equity	9.1	3.0
9. Compared to annual salaries in other firms, my annual salary is fair		
10. Other companies in my industry pay better annual salaries than this one does		
External Recognition Equity	9.4	3.2
11. Other companies in my industry provide better recognition than this one does		
12. My recognition is fair compared to recognition in other firms		

FIGURE 3
Organizational Commitment and Turnover Scale Items

	X	S.d.	α
Intent to Turnover	9.4	3.2	.86
1. It is likely that I will actively look for a new job next year.	2.4	1.7	
2. I often think about quitting.	2.4	1.7	
3. I will probably look for a new job in the next year.	2.5	2.0	
Organizational Commitment	18.5	6.03	.84
1. I would be willing to change companies if the new job offered A 25% pay increase.	3.8	2.1	
2. I would be willing to change companies if the new job offered more creative freedom.	4.6	1.9	
3. If another job offered more status, I would be willing to change companies	4.8	1.8	
4. I would be willing to change companies if the new job was with people who were more friendly.	5.3	1.6	

Intent to Turnover and Organizational Commitment

A 3-item measure of intent to turnover developed by Bluedorn (1982) was used and found to be highly reliable ($\text{Alpha} = .86$). Organizational commitment was measured using a 4-item measure of organizational commitment development by Hunt, Chonko, and Wood (1985). Figure 3 includes the items used to measure organizational commitment and intent to turnover. Responses were recorded on 7-point Likert scales which ranged from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree".

Sample

Questionnaires were mailed to a sample of 1,000 outside salespeople. The sample was obtained from a list broker and included salespeople from a wide range of industries including pharmaceuticals, insurance, electronics, manufacturing, and others. A total of 249 useable questionnaires were returned and used in the present analyses. Demographically, the respondents represented a wide spectrum of salespeople across levels of experience, education, age, firm size, income and pay type.

Study Results

A series of four regression analyses were performed to assess the ability of the six facets (reward categories) of internal and external equity to explain sales force organizational commitment and intent to turnover. An additional two regressions were conducted to assess the individual and relative impact of IPJ and IDJ on the sales outcomes of organizational commitment and intent to turnover. What follows next is a brief description of the results of the above statistical procedures.

The Effect of Internal and External Equity on Organizational Commitment. Perceptions of internal and external equity were found to be positively related to organizational commitment. Internal equity accounted for 14 percent of the variance while external perceptions of equity explained 10 percent of the variance in organizational commitment. Of the six facets of internal equity, perceptions of promotion equity were the most important in explaining salesperson organizational commitment. Of the six facets of external equity, only perceptions of recognition equity was a significant facet ($p < .05$) in explaining organizational commitment. These results suggest

that sales managers should be careful when making promotions to be sure that the process and outcome of the promotion process are perceived as fair. Additionally, it will be important for sales force organizational commitment that salespeople feel their efforts are recognized on a par with other firms in their industry.

The Effect of Internal and External Equity on Intent to Turnover. Perceptions of internal ($R^2 = .20$) and external equity ($R^2 = .19$) explained slightly more variance in intent to turnover than in organizational commitment. As perceptions of equity increase, instances of turnover become less likely. Internal perceptions of recognition, promotion, and incentives were all significant facets of internal equity in explaining sales force turnover. It appears to be important to salespeople that they perceive they are treated equitably on all three of these facets of internal equity when making decisions to stay or leave their current firm. When looking outside the firm, study results suggest that salary and promotion opportunities are important in decisions to seek new employment.

The Effect of Internal Procedural Justice (Equity) on Organizational Commitment. Questions 5 - 9 and 15 of the internal equity scale were used to measure procedural justice. A simple regression investigated the ability of internal procedural justice to explain variance in employee commitment. IPJ was able to account for 11 percent of the variance in salesperson organizational commitment. This finding indicates that fair administration of opportunities within the firm can raise commitment to the organization.

The Effect of Internal Procedural Justice (Equity) on Intent to Turnover. In a similar fashion, we found that behavioral commitment was influenced by internal procedural justice, accounting for 16 percent of its variance. Put differently, emphasis on fair treatment with regard to the methods used to allocate rewards can positively affect both sales force attitudinal and behavioral commitment.

The Effect of Internal Distributive Justice (Equity) on Organizational Commitment. Questions 1 - 2

and 10 - 14 of the internal equity scale were used to measure internal distributive justice. As hypothesized, perceptions of internal distributive justice (respondents thought their outcomes were fair within the context of their firm) were positively related to organizational commitment. The outcome (distributive justice) of the sales management decision process was more important in explaining organizational commitment than was the procedure used to arrive at the outcome (internal procedural justice).

The Effect of Internal Distributive Justice (Equity) on Intent to Turnover. Additional analysis found that internal distributive justice had a greater influence ($R^2 = .16$) on behavioral commitment relative to the effects of internal procedural justice ($R^2 = .02$). The relatively greater influence of distributive justice on both forms of commitment signifies that, at least for the present sample, the sales force is more concerned with fair outcomes (fair pay, etc.) than they are about the methods used to obtain those outcomes. This is not surprising given the relatively solitary nature of the typical outside sales job, and the less frequent opportunities to observe procedural justice in action when compared to a traditional office worker who is on premises daily.

What Sales Managers Should Know

This study's findings have important implications for the effective management of salespeople. Perceptions of equity and justice were found to impact sales force commitment and turnover. Several findings are worth summarizing:

Both internal and external perceptions of equity affect a salesperson's level of organizational commitment and intent to turnover. This is of critical importance because of earlier research which found that managers tend to focus on external factors, rather than internal factors, when making compensation decisions. It is vital that sales managers understand the relative influence and role perceptions of equity (both internal and external) play as they relate to the various components of the sales force compensation package. An important finding was the discovery that internal promotion equity and

external recognition are the most important facets of equity in fostering sales force organizational commitment. It is interesting to note that the somewhat higher order needs of internal promotion equity and external recognition take precedence over the lower order needs of salary and raises.

The long-term nature of the dependent variable, organizational commitment, may help explain the results. Promotions show commitment on the part of the organization as do efforts to gain recognition on behalf of the salespeople. It is recommended that sales managers emphasize the equitable nature of promotion decisions within the firm and that they be encouraged to enhance recognition of salespeople's achievements on an industry-wide basis. These appear to be the cornerstones of engendering salesperson commitment.

As these relate to sales force turnover, internal equity perceptions were more important in explaining why sales people seek new employment. Perceptions of recognition, promotion, and incentives equity were all important (significant) predictors of sales force turnover. Again, it is interesting to note that salary and raises do not appear to play an important role in salesperson intent to turnover. A partial explanation for this could be found in the nature of the present sample's compensation. Nearly 90 percent of the sample is paid on some type of a commission basis. The nature of commission sales would suggest that the salesperson's salary is a function of his/her efforts and skills. Leaving his/her present employer may do little to change this situation. However, perceptions that one's efforts and accomplishments are not fairly recognized or that he/she is not being equitably considered for promotions will likely lead to intentions to turnover. Additionally, if a salesperson feels he/she does not have an equitable opportunity to receive or achieve sales incentives he/she will likely consider other opportunities for employment.

As it relates to external perceptions of equity and turnover, the present study found that external perceptions of salary and promotion inequity would lead to higher levels of intent to turnover. It is vital to effective sales force management that sales managers understand and identify (companies and

individuals) who their salespeople are using as comparison standards. Research by Roberts and Chonko (1996) suggests that sales managers will likely encounter difficulties in making compensation decisions because salespeople use multiple referents in determining satisfaction with their pay. To arrive at equitable pay decisions, sales managers will need to conduct thorough job evaluations, use objective industry data on pay (e.g., Dartnell's *29th Survey of Sales Force Compensation*), interview salespeople individually or in small groups about standards of comparison, and/or hire a pay consultant. Sales managers must provide objective data which shows the salesperson is being paid equitably compared to salespeople both inside and outside the organization.

The same must be done in regard to promotions. Salespeople need to be shown that their opportunities for promotion are equivalent to, or exceed, the promotion opportunities of other firms in the industry. Comparison of firm data (internal promotion equity was shown to affect intent to turnover) and industry data on timetables for promotion will cultivate perceptions of equity as they relate to promotion opportunities and help sales managers manage the vitally important turnover process.

Procedural justice is important to sales force organizational commitment and intent to turnover. Internal procedural justice was found to increase the salesperson's organizational commitment. When people perceive procedures to be fair, resentment will tend to be minimal, even when internal distributive justice is low. The fairness of a firm's procedures has an important impact on organizational commitment because procedures define the organization's capacity to treat employees fairly (McFarlin and Sweeney 1992). Lind and Tyler (1988) conclude that procedural justice is more highly related to institutional evaluations that require a long-term perspective, like organizational commitment. Folger and Konovsky (1989) state that appraisal systems must shift their focus away from distributive justice (outcomes) to procedural justice which establishes grounds for trust and commitment. The reward system is an unequivocal statement of organizational values and beliefs. The authors emphasize that both

what rewards are given and how they are given are the key aspects of reward systems.

Internal procedural justice was also found to be positively related to intent to turnover. The impact of procedural justice on these two important sales outcomes suggests that sales managers must be careful to convey fairness in the manner in which rewards are distributed. How can managers convey fairness in the distribution of rewards? First, sales managers themselves must have a clear understanding of what makes a reward distribution fair. It has been suggested that fair allocation procedures are "characterized by resource distributions that are consistent across persons and over time, free from bias, based on accurate information, correctable, representative of all recipients' concerns, and based on prevailing moral and ethical standards" (Greenberg 1987, p. 55). Folger and Konovsky (1989) offer the following suggestions to ensure perceptions of procedural justice in how rewards are determined:

1. Solicit input prior to an evaluation and use it
2. Two-way communication during evaluation
3. Allow interviewee to challenge and rebut an evaluation
4. Sales manager should be familiar with ratee's work
5. Consistent application of standards

Under conditions of procedural fairness, assert McFarlin and Sweeney (1992), employees will "find it difficult to envision that more positive alternative outcomes could have occurred" (p. 634).

For salespeople, distributive justice (outcomes) were found to be more important than procedural justice. Although the present study found that procedural justice played an important role in organizational commitment and intent to turnover, its findings as it relates to the relative impact of procedural and distributive justice are contrary to those of Folger and Konovsky (1989) and McFarlin and Sweeney (1992). Results reveal that internal distributive justice was more important in explaining both organizational commitment and intent to turnover.

The best possible explanation for these contradictory results lies in the nature of the sample. Because salespeople are judged (and often paid) based upon what they sell, distributive justice increases in importance. Additionally, the boundary-spanning nature of the sales job makes it even less likely that salespeople have sufficient insight into the decision-making process used to allocate rewards. Lowe and Vodanovich (1995) cite research that shows 60 – 70 percent of respondents knew little or nothing about the procedure used for making decisions about their jobs and most felt that their input was not sought in making these decisions. The authors go on to state that an understanding of fairness will be incomplete unless both distributive and procedural fairness are considered. The importance of distributive justice to salespeople is particularly salient in light of research by Tyagi (1985) who concludes that if salespeople perceive some reward to be unjustly distributed, they will place less importance on such rewards.

Another possible explanation for the relative importance of distributive justice over procedural justice is offered by Sheppard, Lewicki, and Minton's (1992) "Levels of Justice" model. The authors argue that typically the outcome of any organizational decision is what is most important for employees. Assessment of the process used to make that decision will likely follow if the decision is seen as unfair. Employees rarely are given much insight into the decision-making process. They usually must infer from the outcome if the procedure was fair. This leaves them no other alternative than to use outcomes as a way of making equity assessments. This suggests that procedural justice can be improved, and thereby increase over-all levels of perceived justice, by involving salespeople in the procedures for making decisions and allocating rewards.

CONCLUSION

This study addressed the important sales force management issues of perceptions of equity and justice and the role they play in sales force organizational commitment and turnover intentions. Certain facets of internal and external equity perceptions were found to affect both sales outcomes.

Surprisingly, it was the higher order needs of promotion, recognition, and incentives equity that drove sales force organizational commitment and intent to turnover. Despite this, it was found that external perceptions of recognition equity were important to organizational commitment and that salespeople did make external comparisons of salary when making decisions to seek new employment. Additionally, contrary to previous research, distributive justice was found to be more important to sales force organizational commitment and intent to turnover than procedural justice. The unique nature of outside sales may best explain this contrary finding. However, the authors point out that enhancing both procedural and distributive justice will have the greatest impact on sales force commitment and turnover.

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