

An Exploratory Study of Business Students' Attitudes Toward Family & Technology Issues as Related to Sales Careers

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ABSTRACT

Many students will enter the sales field for their future careers. However, it is unclear if they truly understand the demands that this career choice will place on their family and personal time. One area of current interest is the study of work-family conflicts on salespersons. It has been proven that salespersons have multiple conflicting responsibilities between their family and work. For some, technology has reduced the conflict while for others it has added additional stress. This paper will describe the results of a survey of business students to ascertain student perceptions of salespersons' careers and the impact of information technology and security issues on salespersons. These results can then be shared with business students to help them have a realistic understanding of what choices they will be making if they choose a career in sales. Hopefully, this will lead to better decisions by the students and provide them with the knowledge to help their families comprehend the requirements of a successful sales career.

INTRODUCTION

Many business students will initially enter the workforce through the sales field. However, it is unclear if their perceptions of the field are realistic. As noted by Stevens and Macintosh (2002-2003, p. 23), this "interest is fueled by the fact that college students make up a large and attractive pool of job candidates," recruiting companies "would like to know the reasons why students are or are not attracted to sales" and professors want to "know what role education plays in students' attitudes and perceptions of sales as a career." Many students have not faced the challenges of juggling a career and family-related issues, including aging parents. Do students understand how technology utilization, along with schedule flexibility and other employment practices, facilitate or hinder their current and future care giving responsibilities for children and parents? A review of the literature revealed the connection of family-related issues, and to a lesser extent, technology issues, to the larger issues of work and family conflict and role conflict and ambiguity for sales people. The questions thus arise: are students aware of work and family conflict issues in general, and care giving, in particular, and are they aware of technology issues that can add to these conflicts?

Business students were surveyed, along with a small number of salespeople (see Authors 2004a, 2004b), by the researchers. The

rationale for looking at students, the focus of this paper, is to see what business students' attitudes toward these issues are. Since many business students will leave college to be salespeople, there continues to be interest in assessing said students' perceptions of the sales field as a career path.

Students are changing and it is unclear if the "me" generation or "gen X" will be willing to manage multiple work-family conflicts. What do they perceive their future career will entail, how does that match with what current salespersons are experiencing, and how would this information help us in academics better prepare the student to manage the work-family conflicts? The authors reviewed the literature on work-family conflict to begin to assess what students will be facing in their future careers. The following is a brief review of prior research in this area.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Work-family conflict has been established by prior research to be bi-directional; i.e., it involves two types of conflict, work obligations interfering with family life (work-family conflict, WFC) and family life interfering with work duties (family-work conflict, FWC) (Marchese, Bassham & Ryan, 2002, pp. 145, 146). Greenhaus and Beutell (1985) identified three key types of WFC in their review of existing literature: time-based conflict (e.g., hours

worked per week, schedule flexibility, child care demands); strain-based conflict (e.g., tension, depression, irritability, family roles expectations); and behavior-based conflict (role expectations).

A growing area of the work-family literature is that of the impact of caregiver arrangements and related issues on employees' attitudes and behavior. Boyer, et al. (2003, p. 179) noted that as "children, siblings, or elderly family members require care, obligation to meet their needs can influence family roles" and ultimately create family-work conflict (FWC). Watson, Srisupandit & Tung (2002, p. 5) noted that the increasing elderly population and the shrinking size of the family have "left caregivers with fewer siblings to help with aging parents and longer time periods to care for family members of the sandwich generation." "According to the National Partnership for Women & Families, 67% of Americans under 60 expect to care for an aged relative in the next 10 years, up from 25% who were caregivers in 1997" (Park, 2005, p. 86). "Family responsibilities, too, typically still fall more heavily on women, and neither society nor employers have found good ways to mesh those with job demands" (Bernstein, 2004, p. 58). Two growing types of elder care add additional family stress, namely, long-distance care, for an estimated seven million Americans (Shellenbarger, 2004b), or in-home care, provided by 24% of American caregivers (Shellenbarger, 2004a). Research in this area has been done by, among others, Gerstel and Gallagher (1993), Jansen et al. (2003), Kossek, Colquitt and Noe (2001), Kossek and Ozeki (1998), Lee, Walker and Shoup (2001), Marks (1998), and Shoptrough, Phelps and Visio (2004).

Research on WFC has reached the selling/sales management literature, with a number of factors being studied, including work environment and mental health (Borg & Kristensen, 1999), salesforce culture, role conflict and turnover (Jackson, Tax & Barnes, 1994), coping strategies and WFC (Nonis & Sager, 2003), turnover intentions (Good, Page & Young, 1996; Good, Sisler & Gentry, 1988; Netemeyer, Brashear-Alejandro & Boles, 2004) and job satisfaction (Boles, Wood and Johnson, 2003; Namasivayam and Mount, 2004).

Students today have incorporated mobile phones and other technology into their every day life. It is uncertain if technology will help resolve some of the work-family conflict, or change it into different stresses and/or conflicts. Being accessible through technology 24/7 has added to their personal time management issues and has necessitated reevaluating work and family conflicts.

"Technostress (also known as technophobia and computer anxiety) manifests itself in two distinct but related ways: the struggle to accept computer technology and over-identification with technology" (Tu, Wang and Shu, 2005, p. 78). Ragu-Nathan, et al. (2004) identified five components of technostress, including "*Techno-invasion*. Technology invading personal lives, so less time is spent with family or on vacation, giving the time over instead to learning about new technology" (Tu, Wang and Shu, 2005, pp. 78-79). Some research was found in terms of the influence of technology on salesperson's careers and role conflict (e.g. see Boles & Sunoo, 1998; Prewitt, 1998; Speier and Venkatesh, 2002). Salesperson technophobia was found to be related to age and education level of salesperson and was a contributing factor to increased role stress (Rich, 2000).

Since the terrorism attacks on September 11, 2001, and given the subsequent passage of the Patriot Act along with Sarbanes Oxley Act of 2002 (AICPA, 2005), the authors decided to investigate attitudes toward computer security issues both at home and in the sales office. Recent security breaches on corporate computers, as well as laptops in the field, has made data protection and security critical if information technology is to continue to play a role in the

sales person's activities in the field. Personnel in the information technology field are very concerned about the salespersons' understanding of the need to protect their laptops and especially the data on the laptops.

Research on student attitudes toward sales as a career has been conducted since 1958. Negative images, due in large part to stereotypical portrayal of salespeople in books, movies and other mass media, were found by practitioners and academicians alike. Later studies revealed a more positive attitude toward sales as a career. Research also expanded to include preferences, cross-cultural differences, and demographic differences (racial, gender). For excellent reviews of student-based career perception research, see the works of DelVecchio and Honeycutt, 2000; Kavas, 2003; Sohail and Bradmore, 2003; and Stevens and Macintosh, 2002-2003.

Based on the literature review and the anecdotal experiences of the authors, the purpose of the study was two-fold: first, to add to the body of knowledge regarding students' perceptions of salespersons' careers; and second, to assess the students' perception of the impact of information technology and security issues on salesperson's lives.

METHODOLOGY

A four page cover letter and questionnaire designed in November 2003 and pretested on eight students in an upper-level Marketing class at a southern regional university. As a result of the pretest, wording on the two technology usage questions was changed from "use computers" to a broader, less confusing, "use any kind of technology". For the three questions regarding how far respondents lived from family members, the response categories were changed from region of the state to distance in miles (less than 20, less than 60, less than 100, or greater than or equal to 100).

The final version of the Institutional Research Board-approved booklet-format questionnaire contained 28 questions. The first 10 questions addressed the following topics: length of employment with current employer, travel expectations of job, extent of travel, hours worked per week, work schedule flexibility, use of technology at work and at home for work purposes, online work assessment, and percentage of time spent on sales tasks (selling, meetings, paperwork, etc.).

The next three questions consisted of five-point scale items. A search of the three volumes of the *Marketing Scales Handbook* yielded two scales that appeared to be appropriate for the authors' assessment of family-related issues. Chonko and Burnett (1983) developed a 27-item scale that measured role conflict (Bruner & Hensel, 1998). One segment (four items) from Chonko and Burnett's scale was used in our study as question #11; this segment represented Factor 3: Family, and required time spent working, socializing (with customers and other salespeople), and traveling. Responses were measured on a five-point scale ranging from "Complete agreement" to "No agreement."

Good, Page and Young (1996) used a 13-item scale adapted from Fournier (1981) to measure work and family conflict (as noted in Bruner, James & Hensel, 2001). The items addressed self-image and esteem, impact on productivity, spousal career conflict, and contentment with current city. A five-point Likert-type scale was used to measure responses, ranging from "Strongly disagree" to "Agree strongly," with "Not applicable" as the fifth scale point. Since specific questions that measured the impact of family members' health on one's sales career could not be found, four questions were added to the work and family conflict scale: health

of spouse/significant other, health of parents or spouse's parents, health of children, and anticipation of career move/change due to health issues in next five years. Question #12 thus consisted of 17 statements.

A search of the literature did not reveal any scales that were up-to-date and relevant to current technology issues (security, training, viruses, and computer usage). Therefore, for question #13, the authors developed a 12-item Likert-type scale, using the same five-point scale that was used by Good, Page and Young (1996), to measure work and family conflict possibly stemming from technology-related issues.

The final series of questions (14-28) dealt with demographics, including gender, age, marital status, number of children, state of residence, and education, computer usage (number at home, Internet access), and family information (parents living, distance from parents, distance from children, and primary caregiver).

RESULTS: OVERVIEW

Surveys were completed by 52 students in two upper-level marketing classes during December 2003. Over half of the respondents were women (29/51, 56.9%) and 44 (86.3%) were less than 25 years old. Most were single (43/51, 84.3%) and more than six out of ten had some college education (32/51, 62.7%). Only four students indicated that they had children (4/51, 7.8%); of these, all four had one child each, and three of the children were under the age of 18. Most of the students were from one state (48/50, 96%). Half of those who responded had one computer at home (25/50) and another 16 (32%) had two computers at home. Most had internet access at home (49/51, 96.1%); 22 (22/49, 44.9%) used dial-up to access the internet while 16 (32.7%) used a cable modem. Most of the students (46/51, 90.2%) reported that both parents were still living, and over 60% (32/51) lived less than 60 miles from their parents. Five students (5/49, 10.2%) indicated that they were the primary caregiver for their parents. No significant differences by gender were found when cross tabulations were run on age, education, and other demographic variables.

Many of the students that participated in the survey are employed. Table 1 shows the descriptive statistics for their employment status.

Table 1
Descriptive Statistics Employment Status

Variable	Mean	SD	Median	Mode	n
Length of employment (months)	25.21	20.17	2.4	6	43
Hours worked per week	27.19	10.09	27.5	20	49

The respondents have been with their present employers just over two years. Over four-fifths of the students (43/51; 84.3%) do not have to travel as part of their jobs. Frequency of travel was evenly spread out from several times a week to monthly or less. Of the eight students who indicated that they had to travel, five (62.5%) said that their travel did not require an overnight stay. Respondents averaged 27.19 hours of work per week, with one person reporting 70 hours a week as his/her workload. Over three-fourths of the students (40/52; 76.9%) indicated that they had a flexible work schedule. Most (80.8%) reported daily usage of any kind of technology (computers, registers, etc.) at work; meanwhile,

21 (40.4%) reported using technology at home for work on a daily basis versus 13 (25%) who rarely used it at home. Over half (27/50; 54%) indicated that their use of the Internet for work is more than it was a year ago; while 21 students said their Internet work usage had remained the same.

One of the issues that this study focused on was the student's perceptions about how a salesperson spends his/her time. Table 2 summarizes the students' estimates about a salesperson's time obligations.

Table 2
Descriptive Statistics
How Time is Spent (Given in Percentages)

Variable	Mean	S.D.	Median	Mode	n
Time spent on:					
selling	29.50	25.81	30	0	48
meetings	7.17	10.96	0	0	48
traveling	4.96	10.88	0	0	47
entertaining	8.91	13.19	1	0	47
sales follow-up	8.62	13.93	1	0	47
professional development	7.81	11.90	0	0	47
paperwork	21.17	26.40	10	0	47

Table 4
Descriptive Statistics
Participant's Perception of Health-Related Concerns

Variable	Mean	S.D.	Median	Mode	n
Able to do things as well as others	3.61	0.63	4	4	51
Personal concerns reduce productivity	2.16	0.77	2	2	50
Family has resources to meet desired lifestyle	3.24	0.72	3	3	50
Spouse's job/career conflicts with mine	1.92	0.91	2	2	25
I certainly feel useless at times	2.10	0.90	2	2, 3	49
Family problems cause loss of time at work	1.58	0.66	1	1	45
Inclined to feel like I'm a failure	1.38	0.67	1	1	50
Nervous/tense/frustrated when I get home	2.06	0.87	2	2	50
Take a positive attitude toward myself	3.40	0.57	3	3	52
I am satisfied with myself	3.44	0.58	3	3, 4	50
Spouse is content with his/her work status	2.91	1.14	3	4	21
I'm content with spouse's work status	2.92	1.08	3	3, 4	25
I'm content with city in which I live	2.92	0.81	3	3	49
Spouse's health has affected my career plans	1.74	0.86	2	1, 2	27
Kid's health affected my career plans	2.60	1.08	3	3	10
Parents' health affected my career plans	1.72	0.97	1	1	36
Make career move due to family health	1.77	0.97	1	1	35

Respondents were then presented with the questions borrowed from the scales mentioned in the Methodology section, plus the set of questions on technology issues developed by the authors. Before proceeding to the scale-based questions, respondents were given the following definition:

For this next section of questions, “family” refers not just to your spouse or significant other, but also to your children, your parents and/or in-laws, and any other significant people that would make up your “extended” family.

Four questions dealt with perceptions of salesperson-family agreement on time spent on four primary salespersons’ activities: working, socializing with customers, socializing with other salespeople, and traveling (see Chonko & Burnett, 1983). Means ranged from 2.14 for time spent working to 2.54 for time spent traveling (see Table 3). Respondents felt there was very much agreement between them and family members on how they spent their time in these four areas.

Table 3
Descriptive Statistics
Salesperson-Family Agreement on the Time Spent

Variable	Mean	S.D.	Median	Mode	n
Time spent:					
working	2.14	1.06	2	1	51
socializing with customers	2.22	1.12	2	1	51
socializing with other salespeople	2.22	1.18	2	1	50
traveling	2.54	1.59	2	1	50

Table 5
Descriptive Statistics
Information Technology and Security Issues

Variable	Mean	S.D.	Median	Mode	n
Using computers is more important in job	3.18	0.95	3	4	49
Required to login using password at work*	3.23	1.05	4	4	44
Required to login when accessing from home*	2.97	1.14	3	4	34
Spouse uses home computer for work*	2.64	1.08	3	3	25
Family uses computer for non-work activities	3.56	0.71	4	4	50
Time on computer takes away from family*	2.23	1.03	2	2	44
Company is overly concerned about security	2.45	0.94	2	2	42
I’m concerned about work computer security	2.18	0.91	2	2	39
I’m concerned about home computer security*	2.56	1.03	3	2	45
Company provides adequate training*	2.68	1.07	3	3	40
Careful to ensure work anti-virus is up-to-date*	2.93	1.05	3	3, 4	42
Careful to ensure home anti-virus is up-to-date	3.20	1.00	3	4	49

As stated earlier, 13 WFC questions (Good, Page & Young, 1996) and four health-related questions developed by the authors were measured on a five-point scale, where 1 = Strongly disagree, 4 = Agree strongly, and 5 = Not applicable. For purposes of analysis, any “5” score was dropped, leaving a four-point scale. As seen in Table 4, respondents tended to agree with positive self-related statements (able to do things, family has resources to support lifestyle, take a positive attitude, satisfied with myself) and spousal career statements (spouse content with his/her job, I’m content with spouse’s job). Respondents tended to disagree with negative self-related statements (feel useless, feel like a failure), work-home conflict statements (spouse’s career conflicts with mine, feel tense when get home), and three health-related career-impact statements (health issues affecting career plans). There were some points of indecision, however. Respondents were torn between agreement and disagreement over “the health of my children has affected my career plans.” Also, while much agreement was found with satisfaction with spouse’s work (spouse’s viewpoint and respondent’s viewpoint), the standard deviation for both was over 1.0, indicating some minority disagreement with these issues. Table 4 provides the descriptive statistics of the participants’ perception of health-related concerns.

Finally, with regard to the technology issues (see Table 5), respondents tended to agree or agree strongly with these issues: using computers is more important in my job today; have to login with a password at work; have to use a password when logging in to the company’s computer system from home*; family members use the home computer for non-work activities; and being careful about having anti-virus software up-to-date both at work* and at home. Those marked with an asterisk (*) had standard deviations larger than 1.0, indicating some minority disagreement. Participants tended to disagree with: time spent on computer takes away from family time and I am concerned about my organization’s computer security. Students were torn between agreement and disagreement over: company is overly concerned about computer security; I’m concerned about computer security at home; company gave me adequate computer training; and my spouse uses the home computer for work.

Given the scope of the exploratory research undertaken, the authors decided to focus on significant differences by gender and work schedule flexibility in this paper. For the scale-based questions, the t test for two independent samples was selected over the Mann-Whitney U test, though there is the risk of violation of the homogeneity of variance assumption and the sample sizes varied above and below 30 (see Sheskin 1997, pp. 153 and 181). Since we did not hypothesize any directional differences, two-tailed probabilities were used.

RESULTS SIGNIFICANT DIFFERENCES

Turning first to gender differences, two significant differences were discovered for percentage of time spent in various sales-related tasks. Women students tended to spend more time on professional development (11.8% vs. 2.5%, $t = -2.809, p < .01$) and paperwork tasks (27.2% vs. 13.7%, $t = -1.744, p < .09$). With regard to family versus student agreement on time spent on various sales activities, women students indicated moderate agreement over how much time they spent on job-related travel, while men students indicated very much agreement (2.96 vs. 2.09, $t = -1.96, p < .06$). No significant differences by gender were found with regard to the 13 WFC questions, or with regard to the four health-related questions.

One significant gender difference was found with regard to the technology issues questions. Women strongly agreed that computers are more important in their jobs today, while men only agreed with the statement (3.39 vs. 2.90, $t = -1.795$, $p < .08$). No other significant differences were found by gender.

Next work schedule flexibility was evaluated, two significant differences were found with respect to time spent on activities. Those students with fixed work schedules tended to have higher levels of agreement with family members on the time they spent socializing with other sales representatives (1.64 vs. 2.385, $t = -1.90$, $p < .07$) and time spent on job-related travel (1.73 vs. 2.77, $t = -1.97$, $p < .06$).

With regard to the WFC questions, significant differences were found for two questions. Those with a fixed work schedule indicated more differences in agreement over their spouses' jobs conflicting with their jobs, while those with flexible schedules tended to deny any conflict existed (2.43 vs. 1.72, $t = 1.827$, $p < .09$). Those with a fixed work schedule tended to agree more that they had a positive attitude toward themselves than did those with a flexible schedule (3.67 vs. 3.325, $t = 1.868$, $p < .07$). No significant differences were found with regard to the health-related questions.

Two significant differences with respect to technology issues were found by schedule flexibility. Those with fixed work schedules were more in agreement with these statements: I must login from home to access my organization's computer (3.625 vs. 2.77, $t = 1.93$, $p < .07$) and I am more careful to make sure my work computer's antivirus software is up-to-date (3.5 vs. 2.75, $t = 2.057$, $p < .05$).

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

There are several limitations that need to be addressed first. The analyses were limited by the small sample size of 52 (or fewer, depending on variable and analytical method). The sample is not a representative sample, since it was a convenience sample and also drawn from a small region of the United States. The study also is affected by the use of borrowed scales and the appropriateness of added items (see Engelland, Alford & Taylor, 2001 for cautions in such use). In hindsight, the 10-item sales activity classification taxonomy developed by Moncrief (1986) should, perhaps, have been used instead of the sales tasks developed by the authors. The scale items also need to be carefully examined through factor analysis and reliability analysis which requires a larger sample size.

CONCLUSIONS

Students did seem to understand that more than half of their time in sales would be spent on selling and paperwork tasks. They may have underestimated the amount of time that would be spent on travel, although with the expanded use of technology, traveling may not be as prevalent in the future. Women students may see the value of professional development more so than males. Most of the students were not working full-time and tended to have flexible schedules therefore they may not be cognizant of work pressures in most sales careers. However, this may have resulted in them picking up on time-based conflict with their families. If one is working on a fixed schedule, the family may be able to establish daily routine patterns. If one spouse has a fixed work schedule and the other one doesn't, this could lead to more stress and conflict. Women students may be feeling the "catch 22" of job expectations versus home expectations here. Most of the students felt that there was agreement between the salesperson and the family about the time commitments with the job. The authors felt that the students

were very naïve about what happens in the real world. It is also unclear about the impact of children's health on students' career plans. With regard to technology issues, there was more agreement than disagreement amongst the students that technology is a part of the job and will have an expanded use in the future.

Even though this was an exploratory study, there are some results that should be of interest to instructors and students. This article or the results from this study could be shared with students to get their opinions and to help them better think about what it would be like to have a future in sales. The next step would be to test whether or not these significant differences between men and women will be maintained, expanded, or minimized with a larger sample size. A wider geographic range of participants is also warranted. The scales need to be tested and further refined by other researchers. A factor analysis of the scales, followed by reliability assessment, is the next step for the authors. More data is also being gathered by the authors as one of several next steps in this vein of research.

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