Mentoring Characteristics and Functions: Mentoring Influence on Salespeople

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Abstract:

Purpose: This paper aims to examine a longitudinal study of mentoring functions and their effect on salesperson attitudes and intentions. **Design/methodology/approach:** The research is based on a multi-year study of salespeople beginning when the salesperson entered the industry being examined. **Findings:** The level of interaction between the mentor and protégé was found to be the only antecedent examined that related to the perceived quality of mentoring functions. Age, education and length of employment for both parties; the degree of age and education difference; and the length of the mentoring relationship were not significant. Successful mentoring appeared to be based heavily on a mentor's willingness and ability to interact frequently with the protégé. **Originality/value:** This study adds to the literature on mentoring, looking at mentoring in a sales context. Research examining mentoring in a sales setting is much more limited than in many other professions, so the findings represent a valuable addition to the sales mentoring literature. Its influence on sales socialization may be very important.

Keywords: mentoring | challenger sale | salesperson performance | sales force management | salesperson turnover

Article:

The recruiting, training, retaining and developing of new salespeople require substantial investment of a firm's resources. Annually, organizations spend billions of dollars training their salespeople (Training, 2016). The challenger sales model (CSM), which stresses the importance of challenging the customer's thinking when necessary, is a recent approach to increase sales that has received considerable attention in the current competitive sales environment (Rapp *et al*., 2014). An important step in the adoption of CSM involves providing effective coaching to assure successful adoption of the approach (Dixon and Adamson, 2011). Understanding how CSM creates value for its sales organization and its customers can help managers make decisions that positively affect salesperson productivity (Farías *et al*., 2017). Previous research indicates that

mentoring is one such way to improve salesperson performance via coaching and role modeling (Brashear *et al*., 2006) while also lowering turnover (Mullen, 1998).

The effects and the nature of mentoring relationships have been examined in a variety of contexts (Gozukara, 2017; Raabe and Beehr, 2003; Tillman, 2001; Whitten, 2017). Only a few studies, however, have examined mentoring in a sales environment (Bradford *et al*., 2017; Brashear *et al*., 2006; Fine and Pullins, 1998; Pullins and Fine, 2002). Due to the uniqueness of the salesperson's role, additional research is needed on mentoring in sales settings (Dahlstrom and Nygaard, 2016; Noble, 2008; Plouffe *et al*., 2013). An outside sales position involves physical and psychological separation from the firm. This often results in the salesperson being isolated from co-workers and perhaps only receiving periodic direct contact with her/his manager (Mulki and Jaramillo, 2011). With feelings of isolation, salespeople are more likely to lack trust in their supervisor and co-workers and be less committed to their organization and its sales processes (Mulki *et al*., 2008).

For salespeople, working as boundary spanners between their firm and the customer can result in negative feelings that go beyond feelings of isolation. Boundary spanners experience considerable work-related stress that must be dealt with (Boles *et al*., 1997; Hochstein *et al*., 2017). Role stress has been associated with a variety of negative outcomes for front-line employees (Fournier *et al*., 2013; Miao and Evans, 2013). Role clarity, on the other hand, has been associated with positive outcomes for salespeople and desired activities (Agnihotri *et al*., 2012; Kohli, 1985). Finally, salespeople often experience a delayed result from their efforts, which can reduce motivation and job satisfaction unless the individual has been prepared for the delayed gratification that comes from finally closing a deal that may have been the product of a long sale cycle (Bagozzi, 1980; Dubinsky *et al*., 1986).

These factors suggest that the support provided by a mentor could be even more critical in selling environments where it can be difficult for inexperienced salespeople to receive support or assistance in adopting new sales approaches from sponsors (Noe, 1988). This study examines effects of protégé perceptions of mentoring on turnover intentions. Possible antecedents of mentoring functions are also explored to gain a more complete view of successful mentoring relationships.

Mentoring

What is mentoring?

Mentoring has been conceptualized in a variety of ways. Kram (1985) viewed mentoring as a developmental relationship embedded in the career of the mentor and protégé. Kantar (1977) said mentors assist protégés in "bypassing the hierarchy", and "reflect" their power off the protégé, giving the protégé indirect power. This conceptualization has been used to support recommendations that managers mentor minorities and females (Ramaswami *et al*., 2010).

Levinson *et al*. (1979) viewed mentoring as an important relationship in adult development. A mentor develops protégés by transmitting elements of the mentor's knowledge, status and experience, as well as helping pull the protégé up the organizational structure (Bass and Bass,

2009) and increase organizational commitment (Lapointe and Vandenberghe, 2017). Carmine (1988) synthesized the role and function of mentors, viewing mentoring as an interactive process that occurs between individuals of different levels of experience/expertise, which aids in the interpersonal or psychosocial development, career development and socialization of the protégé.

In the current study, we define mentoring as a career-based relationship between a more senior salesperson or manager serving as a mentor and a newly hired salesperson who is the protégé. This relationship is initiated to assist protégé development, provide clarity concerning the organization's socio-political nature and help advance the protégé's career.

Mentoring functions

The definition of mentoring adopted in this study addresses the developmental activities or functions that mentors provide to protégés. These are commonly known as the mentoring functions (Noe, 1988). The specific activities included in the mentoring functions are quite extensive (Levinson *et al*., 1979; Zey, 1984). Kram (1985) detailed two broad categories of mentoring functions: career functions and psychosocial functions. These two categories capture the activities presented by Zey (1984) and have been widely accepted in the mentoring literature.

Career functions focus on career-enhancing activities that permit protégés to learn about the job while preparing for career growth/advancement. The mentor's status in the firm and/or profession forms the basis for career functions (Kram, 1985). These functions include providing exposure/visibility, coaching, protecting and challenging assignments. By including protégés in their work, mentors increase protégé visibility and expose them to members of the organization who have influence and can affect the protégé's growth.

Mentors aid in the learning process by coaching their protégés. This activity provides valuable information on how to solve problems and perform duties, both of which relate to the socialization of the protégé to the organizational culture. Coaching also involves providing feedback concerning the protégé's performance and helping correct mistakes. Information and feedback are important, as mentors typically challenge protégés by providing them with a series of assignments. As protégés develop and interact with individuals within and outside the organization, mentors may provide protection. This might involve a mentor stepping in to provide aid when protégé's perform unsatisfactorily.

Psychosocial functions are oriented toward the protégé's psychological and social well-being. They enhance a protégé's sense of competence, identity and effectiveness in a professional role (Kram, 1985). Mentors, once established as a friend and counselor, also serve as role models (Olian *et al*., 1986). Attitudes and values learned from the mentor in the modeling process are key components of the protégé's personal and organizational self-image, as well as their workplace success.

Empirical support for the two types of mentoring functions has been reported in the literature of various disciplines (Schockett and Haring-Hidore, 1985; Noe, 1988). Noe's psychosocial functions included coaching, acceptance, confirmation, role modeling and counseling. Exposure and visibility, protection, challenging assignments and sponsorship were confirmed as career

functions. Other research also offers support for these career and psychosocial dimensions (Scandura, 1992; Scandura and Schreisheim, 1994).

Fine and Pullins (1998) assessed the applicability of psychosocial support (i.e., acceptance, counseling and friendship) and vocational/task behaviors (i.e., coaching, protection and visibility) on a modified version of Thomas' (1993) framework with the addition of several sales-specific items. They identified five sets of sales-specific mentoring behaviors: developing selling skills, counseling, providing exposure, coaching and role modeling. Research indicates that a mentor can serve both functions simultaneously and that these are the most effective mentors (Mullen, 1998).

The theoretical basis of mentoring

Two general bodies of theory have been used to provide a theoretical understanding of how mentoring works – social exchange theory and social learning theory. In a sales context, the social exchange theory indicates that a mentoring relationship would be likely to develop when an individual is attracted to another, and expects the interaction to be in some way rewarding. Her/his interest in expected social rewards draws him/her to the other individual (Blau, 1985). A mentor can be viewed as offering three types of support to protégés. First, they provide social support in navigating a firm's political environment. Second, the mentor can provide support as a role model – helping the protégé achieve success in the job itself. Finally, in terms of vocational support, mentors can help promote the protégé to others in the organization (Scandura, 1992). A protégé, in exchange, might offer information or esteem to her/his mentor or might increase her/his sales performance in order to "reward" the mentor for the time and effort that individual spent in the mentoring role (Mullen, 1994; Pullins and Fine, 2002). Basically, the social exchange theory emphasizes the importance of reciprocity in mentoring relationships. If both parties view the relationship as satisfying, there is incentive to stay in the relationship.

The social learning theory emphasizes learning of both enactive and observational nature. Enactive learning involves mentor-protégé interaction. Observational learning occurs when the protégé observes or imitates the mentor‘s actions (Bandura, 1977, Noe, 1988). The social learning theory indicates that protégés benefit from their mentors through career support and psychosocial support, and a role model on which to base their actions and behaviors. It may be through this "on-the-job" learning that the employee gains increased job satisfaction and commitment due to greater personal performance and through associating with a successful role model represented by the mentor, which may help reduce role ambiguity and increase the mentee's role clarity (Viator, 2001).

While there is clear evidence that mentoring can help the mentee become a better performer and be less likely to leave an organization, some research suggests that mentors also may improve their own performance while mentoring a less senior employee (Ghosh and Reio, 2013; Pullins and Fine, 2002). Mentors report higher job satisfaction and greater organizational commitment compared to their peers who do not mentor (Ghosh and Reio, 2013). The action of focusing the protégé on the proper things to do reinforces those actions in the mind of the mentor and the mentor is also more likely to be effective in her/his own work and feel more positive about the job itself due to mentoring the junior employee.

Lankau and Scandura (2002) noted two types of personal learning – relational job learning and personal skill development learning. Relational job learning involves increased understanding about the interdependence of one's job to others. Personal skill development learning focuses on acquiring new sets of skills and abilities that enhance work performance. They found that protégés imitation of mentors play a key role in influencing protégés learning. Personal learning helps explain how mentoring functions influence job attitudes.

Benefits of mentoring

If mentoring is successful, it should enhance protégé work outcomes (Wilson and Elman, 1990). Ideally, mentoring should result in mentors, protégés and organizations all receiving benefits from the mentoring process (Zey, 1984; Ghosh and Reio, 2013). For example, a mentor can receive assistance in doing his/her job, as well as information, loyalty and prestige from the relationship. Protégé's receive increased role clarity, political protection and enhanced promotion opportunities. Organizational benefits, derived from the development of employee talent, range from higher performance and job satisfaction to lower salesperson turnover. It should be noted that the context in which mentoring is used in an organization may affect how and who mentoring relationships benefit (Lapointe and Vandenberghe, 2017).

Several important work-related outcomes have been linked to mentoring in previous research either directly or indirectly – though not necessarily in a sales setting. These include job satisfaction (Dreher and Ash, 1990), role clarity/lower levels of role stress (Kram and Hall, 1996), organizational commitment (McManus and Russell, 1997) and decreased turnover (Morris, 1995; Ragins and Cotton, 1999). Mentoring may indirectly affect turnover through its links to job satisfaction, organizational commitment. This view was supported by existing sales research where Sager *et al.* (1988) indicated that job satisfaction directly and indirectly affects various stages of the turnover process, whereas McNeily and Russ (1992) reported that organizational commitment is negatively related to propensity to leave.

Mentor functions' effects on sales force work outcomes

The theoretical model of sales force mentoring shown in Figure 1 is based on the social exchange theory and the social learning theory, as well as previous research in mentoring and sales management. It depicts effects of perceived mentoring functions on protégé role clarity and work-related outcomes.

Hypotheses developed from the model relate to effects of mentoring functions on work outcomes. Career functions aid the protégé in learning about the job and organization. Psychosocial functions enhance the protégé's sense of competence and effectiveness in a professional role (Kram, 1985). The literature suggests that providing these functions more effectively will yield more desirable work outcomes, in particular greater levels of role clarity, but does not necessarily provide much guidance as to which mentoring functions are most useful in increasing role clarity (c.f. Viator, 2001; Kim *et al*., 2014). Hartmann *et al*. (2014) indicated that multiple types of mentoring functions help with role modeling. Therefore, we have not developed hypotheses as to which type of mentoring role is more likely to affect the

salesperson's level of role clarity. We do, however, propose that both career and psychosocial mentoring functions will be positively related to role clarity. Thus, we hypothesize that:

> *H1.* The protégé's perception of greater assistance as a result of psychosocial mentoring functions will have a positive effect on role clarity.

> *H2.* The protégé's perception of greater assistance as a consequence of career mentoring functions will have a positive effect on role clarity.

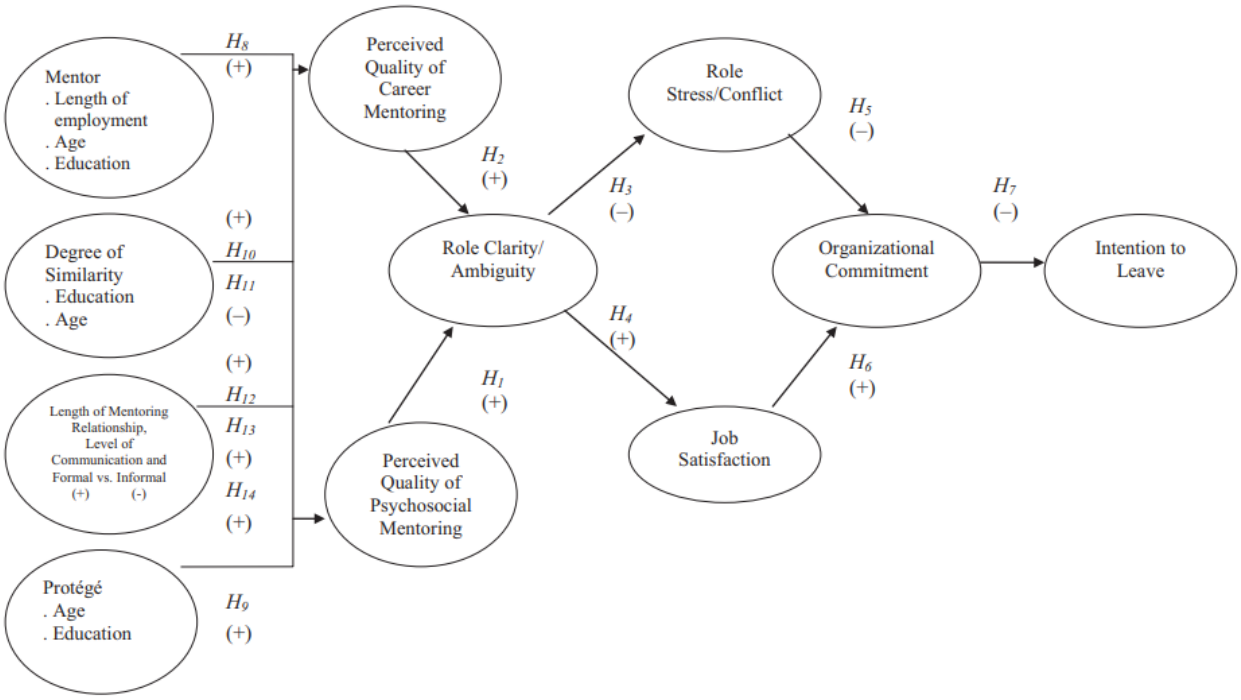

Figure 1. Mentoring in the salesforce

Role stress

Role stress has been studied extensively in the sales literature (i.e. Johnston *et al*., 1990; Boles *et al*., 1997; Miao and Evans, 2013). Research indicates that role stress is negatively related to role clarity. Providing an individual with a clear understanding of what he/she needs to do and how to accomplish that task is negatively related to levels of role stress (Revicki *et al*., 1993):

> *H3.* Role clarity will be inversely related to role stress.

Job satisfaction

Job satisfaction is an important construct in sales force settings. It has been linked to both organizational commitment and turnover intentions (Brown and Peterson, 1993; Johnston *et al*., 1990). Research has consistently recognized a relationship between having a mentor and job satisfaction. In a variety of positions, Dreher and Ash (1990) found significant correlations between mentoring and satisfaction with pay and benefits. In another study, mentoring was

found to have a significant effect on satisfaction in professional service firms (Morris, 1995). It appears that one mechanism by which mentoring influences job satisfaction is role clarity (Kram and Hall, 1996). Previous research indicates a positive relationship between role clarity and job satisfaction (Kim *et al*., 2014; Miao and Evans, 2013; Viator, 2001). Thus, we hypothesize:

H4. Role clarity will be positively related to job satisfaction

Organizational commitment

Organizational commitment is related to employee performance and organizational success (Mowday *et al*., 1982). It can result from a variety of factors, namely, group–leader relations, role states, job satisfaction and employee intention to leave (Mathieu and Zajac, 1990; MacKenzie *et al*., 1998). During a salesperson's early employment, Johnston *et al*. (1990) found that leadership role clarity and leadership consideration positively affect organizational commitment among salespeople. Their study also found that leadership behaviors indirectly affect commitment to the organization – operating through role stress and satisfaction. Therefore:

H5. Role stress will be negatively related to organizational commitment.

There is a significant stream of research that links job satisfaction with organizational commitment. This includes previous sales research that has recognized a positive relationship between job satisfaction and organizational commitment (Johnston *et al*., 1990; Brown and Peterson, 1993; Mulki *et al*., 2008). Additional research indicates that various aspects of job satisfaction are linked with organizational commitment (Boles *et al*., 2007). Thus:

H6. Job satisfaction will be positively related to organizational commitment.

Turnover

Commitment to an organization indicates that the salesperson is interested in helping the firm move forward and is determined to help the organization succeed. There is substantial research that demonstrates that employees who are committed to an organization are less likely to leave or to entertain thoughts of leaving the firm (Brown and Peterson, 1993; Mulki *et al*., 2008). Thus, previous studies indicate that there is a negative relationship between organizational commitment and turnover intentions. For these reasons, we hypothesize:

H7. Organizational commitment will be negatively related to intention to turnover.

Mentoring relationship characteristics

The importance of mentor and protégé characteristics and mentor–protégé relationships can be found both in the conceptualization of the career and psychosocial functions and in social learning theory. According to Kram (1985)

> Career functions are possible because of senior person's experience, organizational rank, and influence in the organizational context. It is this structural role relationship that enables him or her to provide […] career functions (p. 23).

She went on to say:

> Psychosocial functions are possible because of an interpersonal relationship that fosters mutual trust and increasing intimacy. The quality of the interpersonal bond enables the younger to identify with the older and to find a model whom the younger would like to become (p. 23).

A protégé's perceptions of his/her mentor's activities regarding mentoring functions are important to the learning process. Before a behavior can be learned, the observer must understand or be aware of the behavior that is reinforced (Bandura, 1977). As a mentor engages in the mentoring functions, the protégé, through vicarious experience and verbal persuasion, obtains necessary information related to such things as task performance, organizational norms and avenues for career development.

Extensive research by Bandura and his associates (Bandura, 1969; Bandura *et al*., 1975) demonstrated that learning often occurs through imitation or modeling. Observational learning processes have been shown to influence the occurrence of a variety of behaviors including altruism, aggression, delay of gratification and self-reward patterns (Bandura, 1977, 1986). Research indicates that characteristics of the model (status, competence, nurturing, attractiveness and power), the observer (self-esteem, dependency and reinforcement history for imitation) and the situation (task ambiguity and reward contingencies) interact to influence the extent of imitation. Manz and Sims (1981) reviewed various studies and found that characteristics of the mentor and the protégé influence results of vicarious learning.

Mentor characteristics are important regarding her/his ability to perform many mentoring functions, such as teaching the protégé important career performance and psychosocial behaviors. The test for characteristic effectiveness based on vicarious learning lies in the absolute level of the protégé's perception of mentoring functions. High levels of perception of the performed functions logically correspond to higher levels of protégé learning of important career and psychosocial behaviors. Based on conceptualization of the mentor and tenets of vicarious learning, the protégé's perception of mentoring functions performed is contingent on characteristics of the mentor, characteristics of the protégé, similarity of the two and nature of the mentor–protégé relationship. Therefore, the following hypotheses are presented regarding mentor and protégé characteristics.

Mentors perform a variety of tasks in helping the protégé develop her/his career. Many of these relate to the mentor's experience in the firm and across her/his career. Previous research indicates that a mentor's expertise and time in the job are important in guiding the protégé in the firm (Manz and Sims, 1981; Brashear *et al*., 2006). Age has also been associated with the performance of mentoring functions (Mullen, 1998). A mentor's education level may help enhance her/his status in the organization and in the mind of the protégé and help make the mentor's socialization efforts more effective (Johnson and Ridley, 2004). This may be

particularly important if the protégé is highly educated. Overall, the mentor's characteristics can be very important in determining the success of the mentoring relationship (Dougherty and Dreher, 2006; Megginson *et al*., 2006). Therefore, we hypothesize:

H8. Perceptions of greater quality in career and psychosocial functions will be positively related to the mentor's:

a. length of employment;
b. age; and
c. education level.

A protégé who is relatively young will be most likely benefit the most from mentoring, as he/she may have little work-related experience (Bandura, 1986; Viator, 2001). A protégé's education level may also be positively related to their perceptions of the mentor's performance of mentoring functions (Smith and White, 2015). We offer the following exploratory hypothesis:

H9. Perceptions of greater quality in career and psychosocial functions will be:

a. *inversely related* to the protégé's age; and
b. *positively related* to the protégé's education level.

Mentors and protégés who are similar in terms of educational level may have more in common and be more likely to establish a respectful relationship (Burke *et al*., 1993). Relationship quality is positively associated with the quality of the mentoring experience (Eby, 2007) and appears to be based on mutual respect and perceived similarities in personality and work-related perspectives. Therefore:

H10. The degree of similarity in education level will have *a positive effect* on perceptions of the level of quality in career and psychosocial function.

While similarity in perspectives and personality can enhance relationship development in the mentoring process, there is evidence that being very similar in age may have a negative effect on the protégé's mentoring experience (Johnson and Ridley, 2004). This could be due to the mentor having too little power, position and authority in the firm to be able to accomplish the required functions of the mentor (Garvey, 2006). For this reason, we hypothesize:

H11. The degree of similarity in age will have *a negative effect* on perceptions of the level of quality in career and psychosocial functions.

A mentor and protégé relationship length will vary with the requirements of the protégé and position involved. It does appear that relationship length is positively related to the protégés assessment of the quality of mentoring functions (Johnson and Ridley, 2004). Relationships take time to develop and those that last for longer periods of time should result in more positive assessments of the mentoring process (Eby, 2007):

H12. The length of the mentor–protégé relationship *will have a positive effect* on the perceptions of the level of quality in career and psychosocial functions.

The amount of effective interaction between a mentor and protégé has been found to have a positive relationship with protégé perspectives on the quality of the mentoring he/she has received (Mullen, 1998). Given the multiple roles that mentors may perform, higher levels of interaction should be associated with perceptions of better mentoring due to the level and amount of information being communicated (Viator, 2001; Rogers *et al*., 2016):

> *H13.* The level of interaction between the mentor and protégé will have *a positive effect* on the perceptions of the level of quality in career and psychosocial functions.

There has been considerable debate regarding formal vs informal mentoring relationships.

Informal mentoring relationships have the benefit of being formed through mutual agreement between the mentor and the protégé (Viator, 2001). However, informal mentoring arrangements may not provide sufficient levels of constant interaction or the skill-set required for mentoring success (Rogers *et al*., 2016). Formal mentoring programs, on the other hand, tend to be more organized and address issues the organization has identified as important for the protégés success (Noe, 1988). Thus, we hypothesize:

> *H14.* Protégé's in formal mentoring relationships will *have higher perceptions* of the level of quality in career and psychosocial functions.

Methodology

Data collection

The data were collected as part of a large study conducted by the Life Insurance Marketing Research Association (LIMRA). The sampling frame was made up of newly hired, insurance salespeople from 60 North American life insurance companies. Respondents were tracked over a five-year period. Data were collected in six waves using mail surveys. Data collection was initiated within three months of a sales agent's employment. Subsequent data collections came at six months, one-year, two-year, three-year, and four-year employment intervals.

The initial sampling frame included approximately 19,000 beginning sales representatives. This new hire mailing resulted in 5,073 useable questionnaires for a response rate of 26.7 per cent. For the second and subsequent mailings, sales agents who responded to the previous survey were included in the mailing. For example, the six-month mailing was sent to the 5,073 sales agents who responded to the first survey. For this survey 2,230 responses were received for an effective response rate of 44 percent. Using the same procedure, the response rates for all later mailings exceeded 50 percent. Respondents numbered 1502 (1YR), 803 (2YR), 533 (3YR) and 369 (4YR), respectively. The hypotheses are tested using the 228 mentored salespeople completing all surveys.

The data related to the mentors used a different sampling technique. Each sales protégé distributed one survey to his/her mentor. The mentors returned the surveys directly to LIMRA. The agent's employment number was included on the mentor survey and this was used to pair the mentor and protégé data.

Measures

All multi-item scales were subjected to both exploratory and confirmatory factor analysis to purify the scales, along with tests on internal consistency using Cronbach's alpha (Table I). Scale items used in the study are included in the Appendix. Unless otherwise noted, responses were given on a 1-5 Likert-type response scale.

Table I. Descriptive statistics of measures

Measure	No. of items	Cronbach's alpha
Affective commitment	6	0.87
Continuance commitment	4	0.75
Overall job satisfaction	3	0.81
Role clarity/ambiguity	3	0.68
Career functions	3	0.82
Psychosocial functions	4	0.78
Turnover intentions	5	0.88
Role stress/conflict	5	0.75

Mentoring relationship

In the initial survey, salespeople were asked whether they had a mentor – defined as a relationship between a more senior salesperson, manager or person outside the organization and themselves. It was required that the relationship in question be initiated to help the protégé develop a better understanding of: her/his role in the firm, the social/political nature of the work environment and necessary steps to advance her/his career.

Intention to leave

Intention to leave was measured by a multi-item measure
Included in the 3YR survey (Appendix).

Organizational commitment

Two dimensions of commitment were examined: continuance and affective commitment. The items used were adapted from measures developed by McGee and Ford (1987). The continuance commitment measure had four items. Affective commitment was assessed with six items. Commitment was assessed on the 3YR survey (Appendix).

Job satisfaction

An overall job satisfaction measure was used composed of three items adapted from other job satisfaction measures (Brayfield and Roth 1951; Weiss *et al*., 1967). Overall job satisfaction was measured in the 1YR measurement instrument.

Role stress/conflict

This measure was composed of five items (Appendix) scored on a 1-5 scale with larger values associated with greater levels of role stress. Items included in this scale are those that life insurance experts felt were of considerable importance to agents. It was measured in the 1YR survey.

Role clarity/ambiguity

Role clarity was measured with a three-item scale (Appendix) in the 1YR survey. It assesses the degree that the salesperson understands the requirements of his/her job and was adapted from the Teas *et al.*'s (1979) measure to match the position being studied.

Mentoring functions

To assess mentoring functions, protégés were asked to "Rate the extent to which the items describe your mentoring relationship." The psychosocial dimension was measured with a four-item scale and the career functions used a three-item scale (Appendix). These measures are based on the scales used by Noe (1988). These functions were assessed on the 4YR survey. The respondents were assessing their mentoring relationship based on aided recall. Note that the presence of a mentoring relationship was established in the initial survey.

Mentor and protégé characteristics

Demographic variables of age and education were collected. Characteristics of the mentor's length of organizational tenure and current job tenure were included. Protégé characteristics included age and education.

Mentor–protégé similarity

The similarity between education levels was calculated by taking the absolute value of the difference between the mentor's education level and the protégé's education level. Age similarity was measured as the difference between the mentor's and protégé's ages.

Mentor–protégé relationship characteristics

The length of the relationship was measured in months and reported by the protégé. Interaction frequency was reported as a single-item measure asking the protégé, "How often do you interact with your mentor?" The responses were: 1 = less than once a month; 2 = once a month; 3 = every other week; 4 = once a week; and 5 = more than once a week.

The final relationship characteristic concerns the establishment of the mentor–protégé relationship, either formally or informally. Each protégé was asked, "How were you matched with your mentor?" The response categories were: 1 = my mentor was assigned to me through a formal program and 2 = the relationship developed informally.

Description of sample

The initial survey of newly hired salespeople (potential protégés) included both individuals who obtained mentors and those who did not. It contained a variety of demographic information. A total of 90 per cent were white, 71 per cent were married and 68 per cent had one or more children. The average respondent was 35 years old, with ages ranging from 19 to 49 years of age. A total of 49 per cent had at least a bachelor's degree, and 80 per cent of the new salespeople had been employed previously, with 23 per cent coming from other insurance sales positions.

The effects of mentor functions on job outcome

The first analysis tested the relationships between mentoring functions, role clarity and work outcomes (*H1-7*). A two-step approached described by Anderson and Gerbing (1988) was used to develop the measurement model and test the structural model's overall fit (Table II).

Table II. Structural equation model fit

			Full model	**Measurement**
Chi-squared (dfs)			608 (397)	588 (384)
RMSEA			0.06	0.05
RMR			0.06	0.05
GFI			0.81	0.82
CFI			0.87	0.88
TLI			0.86	0.86
IFI			0.88	0.88
Hypotheses, completely standardized paths and t-values				
			Beta	*t-value*
H: Career	→	Role clarity/ambiguity	0.39	2.18
H: Psychosocial	→	Role clarity/ambiguity	0.42	2.39
H: Role clarity ambiguity	→	Role stress/conflict	−0.23	−2.18
H: Role clarity/ambiguity	→	Satisfaction	0.62	3.99
H: Role stress/conflict	→	Commitment	0.06	0.67
H: Satisfaction	→	Commitment	0.58	4.49
H: Commitment	→	Propensity to leave	−0.46	4.55

Measurement models for the exogenous variables and endogenous variables provided acceptable fit. A variety of fit indices were examined (Hoyle and Panter 1995). The measurement model had a Chi-square of 588 with 384 degrees of freedom ($p < 0.01$). The root mean squared error of approximation (RMSEA) was 0.05 and root mean residual (RMR) was 0.05. The comparative fit index (CFI) was 0.88, Tucker–Lewis indicator (TLI) a very stable predictor of fit, was 0.86. The goodness-of-fit index (GFI) and the incremental fit index (IFI) were 0.82 and 0.88, respectively.

The full structural model was specified and analyzed. The model has a relatively good overall fit. The Chi-square is significant with a value of 608 with 397 degrees of freedom ($p < 01$). The RMSEA and RMR were within acceptable ranges at 0.06 and 0.06, respectively. The CFI was 0.87 and TLI was 0.86. Both the GFI = 0.81 and IFI = 0.88 were acceptable. Structural paths pertaining to the individual hypotheses were significant ($p < 0.05$) except the path between job stress and commitment (Figure 2).

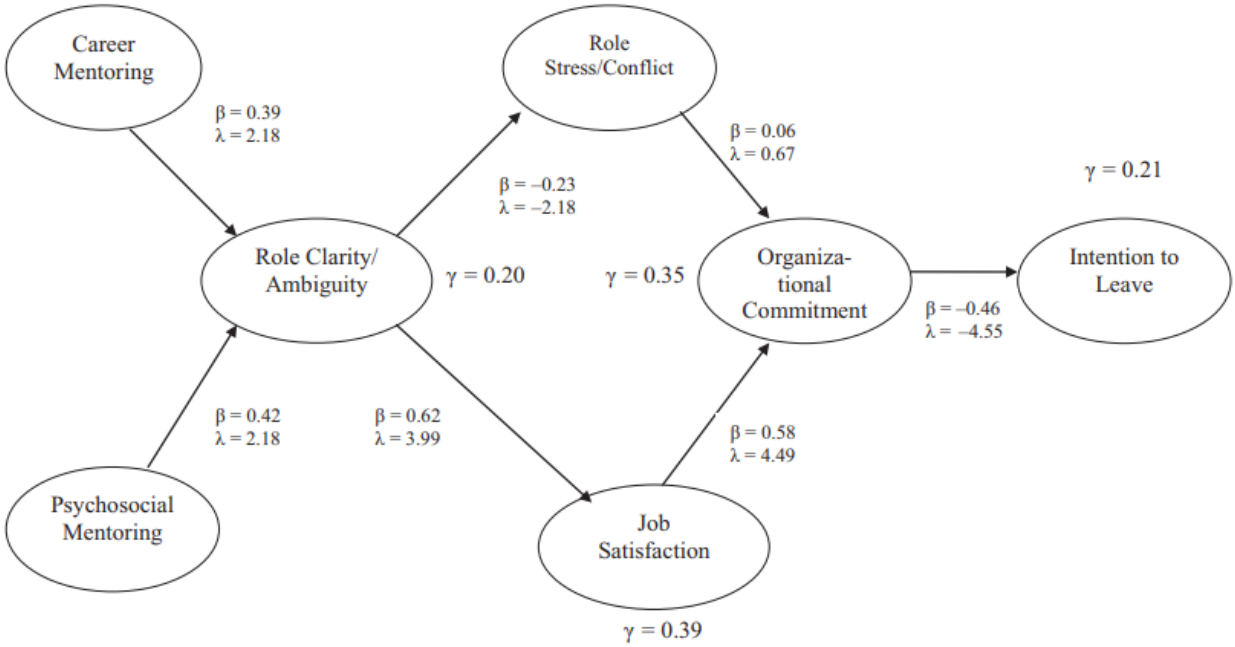

Figure 2. Mentoring model results
Notes: Measurement model: Chi-square (384) = 588; RMSEA = 0.05; RMR = 0.05; CFI = 0.88; TLI = 0.86; TLI = 0.86; IFI = 0.88; GFI = 0.82; Structural model: Chi-square (397) = 608; RMSEA = 0.05; RMR = 0.06; CFI = 87; TLI = 86; IFI = 88; GFI = 81

Career and psychosocial mentoring functions were positively related to role clarity. Role clarity was inversely related to job stress and positively related to job satisfaction. Job satisfaction in turn was positively related to organizational commitment, whereas commitment had a negative relationship with turnover intention.

To gain a more complete picture of successful mentoring, a number of possible antecedents of career and psychosocial functions were tested using regression and analysis of variance. The antecedents included mentor characteristics (length of employment, age, gender and education), protégé characteristics (age, education and gender), mentor–protégé relationship characteristics (length of relationship and amount of interaction) and individual similarities (education difference and age difference). The only significant antecedent to salesperson perceptions of mentoring functions was the level of interaction between a mentor and protégé. Higher levels of interaction increased the perceptions of both career and psychosocial mentoring functions provided by the mentor. The level of interaction between mentor and protégé was found to have a significant effect on both career functions (t-value = 3.02, $p < 0.001$) and psychosocial functions (t-value = 3.22, $p < 0.001$).

Correlates of mentoring functions

To test *H8-14*, mentor–protégé influences on mentoring functions, four multiple regressions were run. The criterion variables were the career and psychosocial mentoring functions. The predictor variables include the mentor's characteristics, the protégé's characteristics, the mentor–protégé similarities and the characteristics of the mentor and protégé. The results are presented in Table III.

Table III. Mentor–protégé characteristics: regression results

Independent variables	**Dependent variables**	
	Mentoring functions	
Mentoring characteristics	**Career**	**Psychosocial**
Mentor length of employment	−0.23[a] (0.12)[b]	−0.09 (0.42)
Mentor age	−0.14 (0.21)	−0.06 (0.64)
Mentor education	−0.01 (0.93)	−0.12 (0.39)
R^2	0.07	0.03
Protégé characteristics		
Protégé age	−0.02 (0.80)	−0.11 (0.31)
Protégé education	0.00 (0.97)	0.16 (0.17)
R^2	0.00	0.03
Similarities		
Age Difference	−0.19 (0.12)	−0.09 (0.37)
Education Difference	−0.13 (0.30)	−0.11 (0.45)
R^2	0.04	0.01
Relationship characteristics		
Length of mentoring Relationship	−0.02 (0.84)	−0.07 (0.54)
Amount of interaction	0.38 (0.00)	0.38 (0.00)
R^2	0.15	0.16

Notes: [a] = beta [b] = *p*-value

Mentor characteristics

The influence of the mentor's characteristics on the level of mentoring functions was presented in *H8*. Perceptions of greater assistance in career and psychosocial functions are predicted to be positively related to the mentor's length of employment, age and education level. The results for the career functions show that the mentor's characteristics are not significant predictors of the career functions ($p > 0.05$. The $R^2 = 0.07$ for the equation is very low and shows that very little of the variance in the career functions is explained by the three predictors. The regression equation for the psychosocial functions also shows no significant predictors. The amount of variance explained in this equation is even lower with $R^2 = 0.03$. To summarize, for *H8ac*, the mentor's length of employment, age and education level have no significant affect as predictors of the mentor's career and psychosocial functions.

Protégé characteristics

The second set of predictors pertains to the protégé's characteristics. *H9* predicts that perceptions of greater assistance in career and psychosocial functions will be positively related to the protégé's age and education level. As seen previously, the predictors account for a very small amount of the variance with the R^2 less than 0.03. The results do not support *H9a* or *H9b*. The results show that age and education are not significant predictors of psychosocial functions. The amount of variance explained is only $R^2 = 0.03$.

Mentor–protégé similarities

The differences between mentor and protégé education level and age form the basis for *H10* and *H11*. The regression analysis results are presented in Table III. *H10* predicts that the degree of similarity in education level will have a positive effect on perceptions of the level of assistance in career and psychosocial functions. Education differences are insignificant at the $p = 0.05$ level. *H11* states that the degree of similarity in age will have a negative effect on perceptions of the level of assistance in career and psychosocial functions. Results show that age is not significant at the $p = 0.05$ for either career or psychosocial functions. The career equation has an R^2 of 0.04 and the psychosocial equation has an R^2 of ^{0}.01. For *H10* and *H11*, similarities between mentor and protégé with respect to education and age have no significant influence on mentoring functions.

Mentor–protégé relationship characteristics

Three characteristics of the mentor–protégé relationship are presented in *H12* through *H14*. *H12* deals with the influence of relationship length on mentoring functions. The independent variable, relationship length, is insignificant with $p = 0.84$ for career functions and $p = 0.54$ for psychosocial functions, as seen in Table III. *H13* deals with the level of interaction. Level of interaction is a significant predictor of the career functions. Interaction has a *t*-value of 3.15 and is significant with $p = 0.00$. The R^2 for the regression is 0.15. Interaction is also a significant predictor of the psychosocial functions ($t = 3.18$, $p < 0.01$) and the R^2 for this equation is 0.16.

ANOVA was used to compare the effect of formal or informal relationships on the mentoring functions. The results, in Table IV, show no difference between the two groups in their levels of either the career or psychosocial functions. The means for both mentoring functions are higher for the informally matched group but not statistically different.

Table IV. Differences in mentoring based on mentor–protégé match

	Mean	***F*-stat**	***p*-value**	**$\eta^h 2$**
Career	3.12	1.59	0.21	0.02
Formal	3.04			
Informal	3.14			
Psychosocial	3.41	1.24	0.26	0.02
Formal	3.33			
Informal	3.68			

This analysis of mentor–protégé relationship characteristics finds that neither length of the relationship nor method of formation (formal versus informal) has any significant effect on perceptions of career and psychosocial functions. The key relationship characteristic from this analysis is the level of interaction between mentor and protégé. As interaction increases, the mentor–protégé relationship provides more career and psychosocial development.

Discussion

Training and developing new salespeople are critical and expensive functions of sales management, involving both sales skills and organizational socialization. Mentoring is one management approach that addresses both issues (Brashear *et al*., 2006). Mentoring's importance can be even greater when there are new processes or new approaches to doing business – such as

installing a new sales process and/or learning new skills. The research presented here examines salesperson perceptions of the functions of mentoring and how they affect sales force work outcomes. The proposed model simultaneously tests relationships between perceptions of career and psychosocial mentoring functions and sales force work outcomes.

Results indicate that psychosocial functions and career functions are positively related to a protégé's role clarity. Role clarity can play a major role in helping new hires adopt sales processes such as CSM, as salespeople who clearly understand what is expected, as well as understand their role in the sales process, tend to be more successful. Role clarity also has a positive relationship with job satisfaction and a negative relationship with role stress. Once again, role clarity deals with the salesperson understanding clearly what her/his job is and how to accomplish goals associated with the work. Job satisfaction is positively related to commitment, which is negatively related to intention to leave. This supports the contention that mentoring leads indirectly to improved work outcomes.

Our findings suggest that mentoring can influence the degree of acceptance of a sales approach such as CSM. By observing and being guided in her/his development as a salesperson and adoption of sales techniques associated with the CSM, a mentee can benefit greatly from having a mentor as a guide and coach in their adoption and full utilization of this a sales approach due to the mentor's guidance in helping the protégé have a better understanding of the salesperson's role in the organization and in the effort to gain new customers. Greater success in understanding the sales approach being used and in use that approach may enhance performance and reduce the chance of the protégé leaving due to lack of sales effectiveness. The importance of role clarity in understanding why a firm is moving to a new sales process and how to use that approach effectively is one clear way that mentoring can help improve an individual's performance in the organization and be less likely to leave due to dissatisfaction and/or lack of commitment (Boles *et al*., 2012). In a variety of studies, mentoring has been associated with greater performance and lower turnover (Brashear *et al*., 2006; Bradford *et al*., 2017).

Findings validate the generalizability of the theoretical relationship developed outside of a sales force context. In the structural model, the relationship of mentoring to selected work outcomes is supported. Specifically, the protégés' assessment of mentoring functions was found to be related to role clarity/ambiguity which in turn, directly or indirectly influenced job satisfaction, organizational commitment and turnover intentions.

The findings related to mentoring relationship characteristics are an extension of previous work by Burke, McKeen, and McKeena (1993). In the study by Burke, McKeen, and McKeena (1993), mentor characteristics of tenure, age and sex increased the level of mentoring functions. The protégé's age and the degree of similarity between the mentor and protégé had significant effects on the mentoring functions. Similar to findings in the present study, the previous study found that the level of interaction between mentor and protégé increased the perception of mentoring functions.

The differences in the findings of the two studies may be a result of the respondents. In this study, the measurement comes from the protégé and in the previous study the mentor provided information on his/her level of mentoring functions.

Managerial use of mentoring should focus on the actual functions that mentors perform and their effects on work outcomes. Managers should examine the career and psychosocial functions that mentors perform, as they indirectly affect work outcomes by enhancing role clarity. Managers also need to strongly encourage greater mentor–protégé interaction, which should increase mentoring effectiveness. Greater levels of interaction can increase a protégé's learning through extended role modeling by the mentor and thereby enhance the protégé's ability to adopt new sales techniques.

Future research and limitations

This study is based on data collection conducted over a five-year period. While a variety of limitations are associated with the use of this type of data (Vermunt, 1996; Lucas *et al*., 1987), that discussion is beyond the scope of this paper. The use of secondary data also may add limitations (Churchill, 1987). Furthermore, time periods may mask intervening factors, which could have affected the variables examined in the study.

This research also is confined to salespeople in a single industry – insurance. Lucas *et al*. (1987) detailed the differences between insurance salespeople and other sales positions. Such salespeople may be more autonomous with limited ties to upper levels of management in the industry, which could affect the effects of mentoring. Insurance is an intangible product that may require different selling skills compared to tangible goods. Also, limiting the data to those salespeople who completed all surveys restricts the sample to salespeople who did not leave the organization after a shorter period of employment. This restricts the range of variance in intention to leave, organizational commitment and other outcome variables. Such a restriction in the range of variance likely accounts for the relatively weak fit of the model.

Reward orientations and self-efficacy also may need to be included in future studies. Individuals who have higher intrinsic reward orientations may look for more psychosocial levels of mentoring (Turban and Dougherty, 1994). Extrinsically oriented salespeople might lean toward career-oriented functions based on a desire for power, recognition and advancement. Saks (1995) suggested that self-efficacy can have a moderating affect when measured at the initiation of a job and a mediating one when measured after training and initial career adjustments. Controlling for self-efficacy that existed prior to joining the firm would better capture the true effect of any mentoring activities on subsequent sales force work outcomes. Future studies should also look at other mentoring forms (e.g. formal vs informal) and explore other marketing jobs when testing the influence of mentoring. Likewise, the moderating influence that ethnicity may have on mentoring should be examined in future research (Thomas, 1993). With the influence of teams in the sales management literature, future research might consider the relationship between mentoring and team development (Rapp *et al*., 2010) and the impact on the success of salespersons. Finally, the limited research on mentoring in a sales environment makes it difficult to provide strong theoretical justification for some of the proposed relationships examined in this study so the hypotheses and results should be considered exploratory in nature. Hopefully, this research and additional studies regarding sales force mentoring can provide a greater theoretical background for future mentoring research in a sales environment.

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Appendix. Measure items

Continuance commitment

1. I feel I have too few options to consider leaving this agency.
2. It would be very hard for me to leave my agency right now even if I wanted to.
3. Too much in my life would be disrupted if I decided to leave my agency Right now.
4. It would be too costly for me to leave my agency in the near future.

Affective commitment

1. I feel a strong sense of belonging to my agency.
2. I feel "emotionally attached" to this agency.
3. This agency has a great deal of personal meaning-for me.
4. I feel like "part of the family" at this agency.
5. I would be happy to spend the rest of my career with this agency.
6. I enjoy discussing my agency with people outside it.

Turnover intention to leave

1. I will probably look for a job in a different company in the next year.
2. I would turn down an offer from another company if it came tomorrow.
3. I plan to stay with this company for quite some time.
4. I am not sure that this is the job for me.
5. I often think about quitting.

Career mentoring functions

1. Helped you finish tasks-or meet deadlines that otherwise would have been difficult to meet.
2. Helped you meet new colleagues.
3. Given you assignments that present opportunities to learn new skills.

Psychosocial mentoring functions

1. Encouraged you to try new ways of behaving in your job.
2. Discussed your questions or concerns regarding your feelings of competence, commitment to advancement, relationships with peers and supervisors, or work/family conflicts.
3. Shared personal experiences as an alternative perspective to your problems.
4. Encouraged you to talk openly about anxiety and fears that detract from your work.

Role stress/conflict

Please indicate how concerned you are about each of the following issues:

1. Ability to sell.
2. Communications skills.
3. Acceptance by clients.
4. Meeting supervisor's expectations.
5. Ability to learn the business.

Role clarity/ambiguity

1. I know exactly what is expected of me in this job.
2. I know exactly what my supervisor expects of me.
3. I have the clear cut authority I need to accomplish tasks required of me.