

Role Stress, Work-Family Conflict and Emotional Exhaustion: Inter-Relationships and Effects on some Work-Related Consequences

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Abstract:

Recent research demonstrates that attitudes toward the workplace are influenced by both work and non-work domains. This study examines the inter-relationships of role conflict, role ambiguity, work-family conflict, emotional exhaustion, job satisfaction and propensity to leave in a sales environment. Results indicate that: role conflict is significantly related to emotional exhaustion; work-family conflict is significantly related to both emotional exhaustion and job satisfaction; and, that emotional exhaustion and job satisfaction are related to salesperson propensity to leave. These results support other research indicating the conflict between the work and home domains is highly related to important workplace attitudes and perceptions and suggests that work-family conflict should be included in models examining employee response to the effects of stress.

Keywords: role stress | work-family conflict | emotional exhaustion | job satisfaction

Article:

In many modern work environments, boundary-spanning employees continually face role conflict and role ambiguity (Sager 1994; Goolsby 1992). Recently, studies have found that work related role stress (role conflict and role ambiguity) is interrelated with conflict between work and family responsibilities (Bedeian, Burke and Moffett 1988; Good, Page and Young 1996). A large body of research further indicates that work related role stress and work-family conflict can affect the attitudes of employees toward their job (e.g. Babin and Boles 1996; Good, Sisler and Gentry 1988; Sager 1994). The inter-relationships of these work-related and family-related stress constructs has, in recent years, become a major issue for employers in the United States.

There are several reasons for this increased focus on conflict between work and family responsibilities. First, changing compositions of U.S. households are at least partially responsible

for this trend with increasing numbers of single-parent and dual-career households represented. Today, the "traditional family" where the father works, the wife is a homemaker, and there are one or more children, is becoming obsolete with less than ten percent of the U.S. population living in that type of family. Second, over sixty percent of married women with a child under the age of sixteen are in the workforce (Duxbury and Higgins 1991). Recent organizational research suggests there is considerable conflict between work and family responsibilities with experiences at work spilling over into the family role and vice versa (Williams and Alliger 1994). A major issue faced by many employed adults in the U.S. is the daily juggling act they must perform to balance conflicting demands of work and family responsibilities. Unfortunately, with few exceptions research in the sales environment has not studied the affect of conflict between work and family.

The current study seeks to fill this void in the research by testing several propositions. First, it will examine the inter-relationships between role conflict, role ambiguity, and work-family conflict. Second, this research will examine the relationships of those constructs with emotional exhaustion, job satisfaction, and propensity to leave for the first time in a salesforce setting. These constructs have proven important in a variety of organizational settings including sales force management. In fact, salesforce satisfaction and propensity to leave have been the subject of a considerable body of research (e.g. Brown and Peterson 1993; Sager 1994). However, a review of the literature suggests that, compared to the volume of research focusing on work-related role stress, studies including work-family conflict and emotional exhaustion have not received widespread attention (Babin and Boles 1996; Good et al. 1996; Singh, Goolsby, and Rhoads 1994). Thus, examining the inter-relationships between these constructs will make a contribution to the sales literature.

A brief review of the literature is presented in the following section. Then, a model of relationships between previously identified constructs is proposed, followed by a brief description of the methods used in the study. Finally, results are provided and discussed with respect to previous research, and their future implications for sales management theory and practice.

Background Literature

Role Stress in Sales Settings

An employee experiences role conflict when he/ she receives incompatible sets of expectations that need to be satisfied simultaneously. Role ambiguity results when an employee is uncertain what type of job behavior to perform in a given work situation. These two constructs are often viewed as the primary components of role stress (Behrman and Perreault 1984). Previous research indicates that role conflict and role ambiguity affect a wide range of attitudes and behaviors across a variety of work settings (Brown and Peterson 1993; Goolsby 1992; Jackson and Schuler 1985). Moreover, the relationship of role conflict and role ambiguity to job related attitudes and behaviors such as emotional exhaustion, job satisfaction, and propensity to leave is complex and difficult to define with certainty (e.g. Bacharach et al. 1991; Netemeyer et al., 1990; Sager 1994).

Research examining the relationships of role conflict, role ambiguity, and work-family conflict have consistently found these constructs to be inter-related. Some studies have posited that work-related role stress is antecedent to work-family conflict (Bedeian et al. 1988; Boles and Babin 1996). Other studies view these three constructs as being related but do not necessarily view role stress as antecedent to work-family conflict (Good et al. 1996; Netemeyer, Boles and McMurrian 1996).

Work-Family Conflict

Conflict between an individual's work and home responsibilities has been labeled work-family conflict. Work-family conflict, is defined as a type of interrole conflict in which responsibilities from the work and family domains are to some degree incompatible (Greenhaus and Beutell 1985). It results from trying to meet an overabundance of conflicting demands from two domains-work and family/friends/outside commitments. Responsibilities in both areas are important individually yet, when taken together, often place unreasonable demands on an individual.

The changing nature of the work-force, with greater numbers of dual-career and single parent households, increases the potential for conflict to occur between work and family responsibilities and makes work-family conflict an important work-related issue. This conflict is not limited to married individuals. Single parents and other single people also face the challenges of balancing work with children, friends, parents and/or other commitments outside the workplace. Conflict between work requirements and family concerns can be found across all work environments. However, the unique nature of selling with its time demands, psychological strain, work-related role stress and performance orientation can put unusual pressure on the salesperson (Dubinsky et al., 1986). Though the effects of role stress have been extensively studied for these employees, work-related consequences of work-family conflict have not been clearly determined, particularly in a customer-contact position (Boles and Babin 1996; Good et al. 1988).

Emotional Exhaustion

Emotional exhaustion occurs when an individual is facing seemingly overwhelming demands on his/her time and energy. Emotional exhaustion, a "state caused by psychological and emotional demands made on people" (Bacharach et al. 1991, p. 44), is the central or core dimension of burnout (Gaines and Jermier 1983). Emotional exhaustion is important since it can be conceptualized as the first stage of burnout and, thus, is a point of possible managerial intervention in the burnout process.

Emotional exhaustion appears to be most prevalent among workers in boundary spanning positions such as salespeople (Etzion 1984; Singh et al., 1994). Previously identified antecedents of emotional exhaustion include working in positions with: 1) high levels of interpersonal interaction; 2) high levels of work-related role stress; and, 3) high levels of non work-related stress (e.g. Etzion 1984; Hagen 1989). Research examining antecedents of emotional exhaustion has tended to focus on work related stress as the primary antecedent. However, some research suggests that non work related sources of stress are at least as important (Bacharach et al. 1991; Etzion 1984). Emotional exhaustion is of concern to managers since it is related to lower job

satisfaction and increased turnover intentions (e.g. Maslach and Jackson 1981; Hagen 1989; Singh et al. 1994).

Previous studies concerning work related consequences of emotional exhaustion is quite limited in a marketing setting (Singh et al. 1994). This lack of previous research, coupled with the limited understanding of work-family conflict, in a sales environment represents a significant gap in the literature for two reasons. First, sales positions represent a large and growing type of employment, and individuals filling these positions play a critical role in the economy (Michaels and Dixon 1994). Second, the nature of boundary roles in organizations may result in salespeople experiencing high levels of work related role stress (e.g., Sager 1994) which is related to work-family conflict and emotional exhaustion. Thus, salespeople as a group appear likely candidates to experience work-family conflict, emotional exhaustion, and their work related consequences.

Job Satisfaction and Propensity to Leave

Job satisfaction has received extensive attention in the sales force literature (i.e. Behrman and Perreault 1984; Brown and Peterson 1993). While much of this research has examined antecedents of job satisfaction such as role conflict and role ambiguity, other studies have detailed potential consequences. One important construct that has often been linked to is propensity to leave (Sager 1994). Propensity to leave is an important construct since may be an immediate precursor to actual turnover (Futrell and Parasaraman 1984). Greater job satisfaction is associated with lower propensity to leave. However, there is evidence that the job satisfaction → propensity to leave relationship can be indirect, operating through organizational commitment (Brown and Peterson 1993; Johnston et al. 1990).

Hypothesized Relationships and the Proposed Model

Empirical and theoretical work addressing the inter-relationship of the constructs examined in this study indicate that the constructs involved are highly interrelated to one another. Previous research supports many of the linkages proposed in the current study. However, in the cases of work-family conflict and emotional exhaustion, the marketing literature examining their inter-relationships with role stress, job satisfaction, and propensity to leave is very limited. Currently, we cannot be certain if their effects are similar to those found in non-business settings. Thus, additional study appears warranted to help clarify the inter-relationships of role conflict and role ambiguity with a number of other constructs.

A number of studies discuss the spillover of work-related events into the family life of an employee and vice versa (e.g. Duxbury and Higgins 1991; Williams and Alliger 1994). If spillover does indeed occur, then these constructs may be antecedents of one another at various times and consequences at other times--depending on events in the home and at work. Thus, while it is expected that role conflict, role ambiguity, and work-family conflict are related, no causal ordering is hypothesized. Regarding the role stress relationship with work-family conflict, we propose that:

H1: Role conflict, role ambiguity, and work-family conflict will be positively interrelated.

Extensive previous research suggests that both role constructs are predictors of job satisfaction (e.g. Babin and Boles 1996; Brown and Peterson 1993; Jackson and Schuler 1985). However, some research indicates that these effects may be mediated by various constructs. For example, Boles and Babin (1996) found that the effect of role conflict and role ambiguity on job satisfaction was partially mediated by work-family conflict. Other research findings demonstrate that emotional exhaustion mediates the linkage between role conflict and job satisfaction (Bacharach et al. 1991). Thus, despite the large body of previous research, evidence concerning the nature of the inter-relationships between these constructs is still limited and somewhat contradictory. However, based on the preponderance of existing evidence, we propose:

H2: Role conflict will be negatively related to job satisfaction.

H3: Role ambiguity will be negatively related to job satisfaction.

In addition to role conflict and role ambiguity being related to job satisfaction, work-family conflict also has been proposed as an antecedent of job satisfaction (Bedeian et al. 1988). Marketing studies examining the work-family conflict-job satisfaction linkage have generally found a significant negative relationship between these constructs (Boles and Babin 1996; Good et al., 1988; Good et al. 1996). However, studies of non-marketing employees report nonsignificant results (Bacharach et al. 1991; Bedeian et al., 1988). It appears that the type of position being studied influences the work related effects of work-family conflict. We propose that:

H4: Work-family conflict will be negatively related to job satisfaction.

There is substantial empirical evidence which indicates that role stress is related to job satisfaction and some research suggesting that work-family conflict also is related to job satisfaction. In addition, the available evidence indicates that emotional exhaustion also is negatively linked to job satisfaction (e.g. Lee and Ashforth 1996; Singh et al. 1994). Therefore, we propose that:

H5: Emotional exhaustion will be negatively related to job satisfaction.

Regarding the relationships of role conflict, role ambiguity, and work-family conflict with emotional exhaustion, previous research indicates that role conflict and/or role ambiguity are related to employee perceptions of emotional exhaustion among employees in a variety of occupations. Schwab et al., 1986; Singh et al., 1994). (e.g. Cordes and Dougherty 1993; Hagen 1989; Lee and Ashforth 1996 Schwab et al., 1986; Singh et al., 1994). Moreover, there appears to be a significant link between work-family conflict and emotional exhaustion (Bacharach et al; 1991). Though the work-family conflict-emotional exhaustion link has been less extensively examined, Bacharach et al. (1991) reported a significant relationship between these two constructs. A positive link between job-related stress and emotional exhaustion is supported by the literature, with role conflict and role ambiguity related to greater levels of emotional exhaustion. Thus, previous research indicates that role conflict, role ambiguity, and work-family conflict are related to emotional exhaustion. We hypothesize:

H6: Role conflict will be positively related to emotional exhaustion.

H7: Role ambiguity will be positively related to emotional exhaustion.

H8: Work-family conflict will be positively related to emotional exhaustion.

Finally, both emotional exhaustion and job satisfaction have been identified in the literature as potential predictors of propensity to leave (e.g. Lee and Ashforth 1996; Sager 1994; Singh et al. 1994). Thus we hypothesize that:

H9: Emotional exhaustion will be positively related to propensity to leave.

H10: Job satisfaction will be negatively related to propensity to leave.

Figure 1 illustrates the hypothesized relationships.

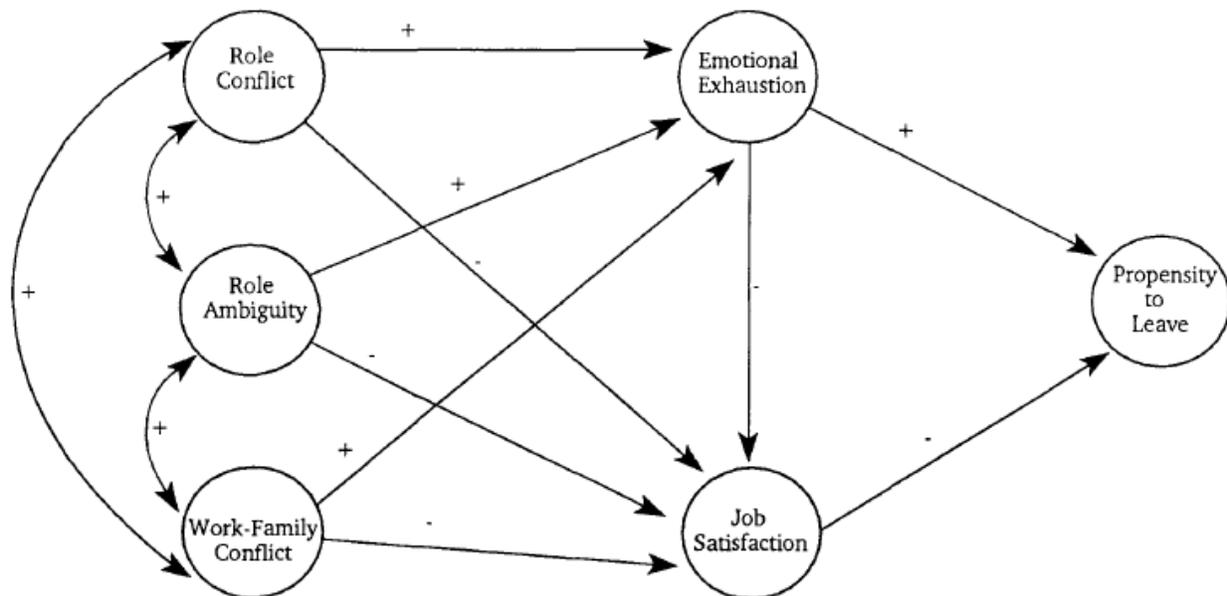


Figure 1. Proposed Model

Research Methodology

Sample

Surveys were distributed to 123 salespeople employed by a regional media firm. After a follow-up mailing, 104 usable responses were obtained, representing an eighty-five percent response rate. Salespeople for this firm function in the institutional seller role (Moncrief 1986). Compensation is based on salary with yearly bonuses based on meeting quota. Respondents reported that approximately fifty percent of their time was spent traveling to making sales calls.

The typical respondent was thirty-one years old and had approximately two years of tenure with the firm. Sixty-six percent of the respondents were male and sixty-nine percent had a college

degree. Many respondents were relatively young-averaging less than eight years of work experience. Fifty-eight percent of the respondents indicated that they were married and/or had children under the age of eighteen.

Measures

To enhance the ability to compare this study with prior research, all the measures in the study have been used in prior organizational research. Cronbach's alpha for all measures met or exceeded .80 as shown on the diagonal in Table 1.

Table 1. Correlations of Study Constructs¹

	Mean	Std. Dev.	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Role Conflict	3.1	.79	(83)	.54 ^a	.50 ^a	.58 ^a	.41 ^a	.49 ^a
2. Role Ambiguity	2.4	.81	(81)	.44 ^a	.41 ^s	-.36 ^a		.54 ^a
3. Work-Family Conflict	2.3	.51	(80)	.48 ^a	-.41 ^a	.41 ^a		
4. Emotional Exhaustion	2.0	1.08	(90)	-.40 ^a	.50 ^a			
5. Job Satisfaction	5.6	.77	(89)	-.60 ^a				
6. Propensity to Leave	2.4	1.53	(93)					

¹all measures are on a seven point scale ranging from 1-7 except emotional exhaustion which is measured on a 0-6 scale, and work-family conflict which is scored on a 1-5 scale.

^asignificant at (p < .01) level.

Construct reliabilities are on the diagonal.

Role conflict (eight items) and role ambiguity (six items) were assessed using the Rizzo, House, and Lirtzman (1970) instrument. This measure has been widely accepted as a measure of these two constructs. It has been used extensively in sales research (e.g. Behrman and Perreault 1984; Johnston et al. 1990). Satisfaction with the job was measured using the satisfaction with the job sub scale of INDSALES (Churchill, Ford, and Walker 1974) which was designed for salesforce research. This measure is composed of twelve items. Both of these measures were scored on a seven point rating scale with 1 = strongly disagree and 7 = strongly agree.

The emotional exhaustion measure was based on nine items from Kreitner and Kinicki (1992). Their measure is an adaptation of the Maslach Burnout Inventory. Items were scored on a seven-point scale with higher scores indicating greater levels of emotional exhaustion. Scales were anchored with 1 = never and 7 = every day.

The propensity of an employee to leave his/her position was measured using Bluedorn's (1982) measure. This measure has been used extensively in salesforce research (e.g. Johnston 1990; Sager 1994). It has four items and was scored on a seven point rating scale with larger numbers indicating a greater propensity of the employee to leave his/her position. The scale is anchored by 1 = terrible chance and 7 = excellent chance.

Work-family conflict was measured by eight items from Burke, Weir, and DuWors' (1979) scale assessing the impact of one's job on home activities. These items measure the effect of work demands on: physical and mental states at home, available time to meet home responsibilities and social activities, and the quality of family relationships (See Appendix for the work-family conflict items). The items represent areas where work and home responsibilities/demands can

collide. This measure is one of the most commonly used work-family conflict scales (e.g. Bedeian et al. 1988; Boles and Babin 1996; Burke 1989). It contains items that are valid for both married and unmarried individuals—since many unmarried employees may have significant family/personal relationships. In fact, mean scores of the constructs were not significantly different for the group that was married and/or had children under age eighteen as compared to the group that was not married and did not have any children under age eighteen. Further, several previous work-family conflict studies appear to have examined all employees regardless of family status (e.g. Boles and Babin 1996; Good et al. 1996). Respondents reported on a five point rating scale anchored by "strong negative impact" and "strong positive impact" on one's family life. Consistent with prior usage, items were reverse scored and summed to arrive at an assessment of work-family conflict (i.e. Bedeian et al. 1988).

Method

The relationships proposed in the theoretical model were tested using structural equations analysis with the EQS statistical package. Summated indicators were used to test the model—consistent with latent structure measurement theory (Kenney 1979). The error variances were set to $(1 - \text{reliability}) * \text{standard deviation}$ (Joreskog and Sorbom 1989). The exogenous constructs were allowed to correlate.

Results

Means, correlations, and standard deviations for those constructs included in the study are presented in Table 1. These are consistent with previous research and indicate that role conflict, role ambiguity and work-family conflict are positively related ($p < .01$), supporting H1. The other correlations also are consistent with previous theory and empirical results.

Testing the hypothesized relationships provided support for some of the hypothesized relationships. Results indicate an adequate fit for the overall model ($CFI = .959$; $\chi^2 = 11.86$, $d.f. = 3$; $p < .01$). Of the three exogenous constructs, only work-family conflict was related to job satisfaction ($-.36$). Neither role conflict ($-.10$) nor role ambiguity ($-.14$) was significantly related to job satisfaction. Thus, H2 and H3 were rejected while H4 was accepted. Further, emotional exhaustion also was not related to job satisfaction ($-.08$) leading to the rejection of H5.

Both role conflict ($.49$) and work-family conflict ($.32$) were significantly related to emotional exhaustion, providing support for H6 and H8. However, role ambiguity ($-.05$) was not significantly related to emotional exhaustion leading to the rejection of H7. Finally, both emotional exhaustion ($.30$) and job satisfaction ($-.54$) were significantly related to propensity to leave. This finding lends support to H9 and H10. Path estimates are presented in Figure 2 and in Table 2. Overall fit indices are included in Table 2.

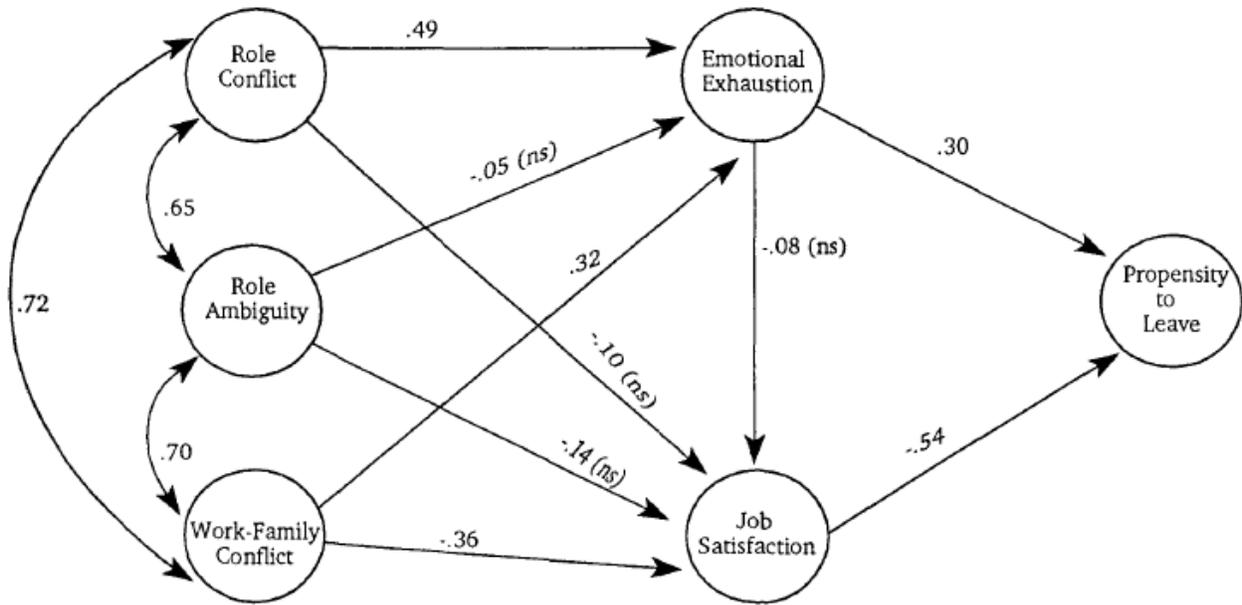


Figure 2. Proposed Model

Table 2. Results from Testing Hypothesized Relationships

Relationships	Parameter Estimates	Hypothesis: Supported
Role Conflict → Job Satisfaction	-.10	No
Role Ambiguity → Job Satisfaction	-.14	No
Work-Family Conflict → Job Satisfaction	-.36 ^a	Yes
Emotional Exhaustion → Job Satisfaction	-.08	No
Role Conflict → Emotional Exhaustion	.49 ^a	Yes
Role Ambiguity → Emotional Exhaustion	-.04	No
Work-Family Conflict → Emotional Exhaustion	.32 ^a	Yes
Emotional Exhaustion → Propensity to Leave	.30 ^a	Yes
Job Satisfaction → Propensity to Leave	-.54 ^a	Yes
Model Fit Indices		
Chi Square	11.686	
df	3	
p < .01		
CFI	.959	

^asignificant at (p < .01) level.

Discussion

Findings from the current study contribute new insights into the relationships between role conflict, role ambiguity, work-family conflict, job satisfaction, and propensity to leave. The high correlations between work related stress (role conflict and role ambiguity) and work-family conflict support prior research which suggests that spillover does occur between work and home domains (Good et al. 1996; Williams and Alliger 1994).

Role conflict and work-family conflict were both significantly related to emotional exhaustion which is consistent with prior research (Bacharach et al., 1991; Singh et al. 1994). However,

finding no relationship between role ambiguity and emotional exhaustion was unexpected and suggests that the inclusion of work-family conflict may attenuate the relationship between role ambiguity and emotional exhaustion reported in some earlier studies (Lee and Ashforth 1996).

The current research found no relationship between role conflict, role ambiguity and job satisfaction. This finding was unexpected since prior research has reported a significant relationship between these constructs in the past (e.g. Behrman and Perreault 1984; Brown and Peterson 1993). One possible explanation for the difference is that most previous studies did not include work-family conflict in their models. When included, the work-family conflict-job satisfaction correlation has often been significant. However, existing research has reported conflicting findings with some studies suggesting no direct relationship between these two constructs (Bacharach et al. 1991; Bedeian et al. 1988) and others reporting direct linkages (Boles and Babin 1996; Good et al. 1996). It may be that work-family conflict affects a salesperson's job satisfaction through its effect on the work-family interface to a greater degree than occurs in other work settings. Why this happens may have to do with travel requirements and/or the boundary-spanning nature of the job compared to a retail management positions (Good et al. 1988) or accountants (Bedeian et al. 1988), both of which are positions that are less likely to involve travel and offer fewer boundary-role encounters. Finally, the proposed relationships between both job satisfaction and emotional exhaustion with propensity to leave were supported. Both constructs were significantly related to propensity to leave.

Managerial Implications

Study results suggest that work-family conflict and emotional exhaustion may be more inter-related with workplace attitudes for boundary-spanning employees than in other employment settings—possibly due to the stressful nature of these positions (e.g. Good et al., 1988; Michaels and Dioxin 1994; Sager 1994). Facing customer complaints/concerns all day, failing to close sales, and/or losing a key customer can exacerbate any negative events at home and vice versa. Thus, boundary spanning positions may be more susceptible to negative relationships between work-family conflict and job satisfaction. Further, our findings support the idea that employees in these positions may experience greater negative effects from emotional exhaustion since work-family conflict, as well as work-related role conflict, are positively related to emotional exhaustion.

For sales managers, explicitly recognizing the affect of workplace stress on a salesperson's conflict outside of work, and vice versa, may be the first step in addressing the problem of conflict between the work and home domains. One possible way to reduce the negative effects associated with role stress, work-family conflict and emotional exhaustion involves providing a supportive work environment (Babin and Boles 1996; Etzion 1984; Kemery, Bedeian, and Mossholder 1987; Schwab et al. 1986). This could be accomplished by the organization formally recognizing the importance of an employee's family and by supporting other activities not directly related to career success. Presently, few firms explicitly recognize the importance of an employee's family in their personnel policies.

Another managerial issue suggested by study results would be to reduce role conflict as well as work-family conflict as a means of lowering employee perceptions of emotional exhaustion. By

letting salespeople clearly know what they are allowed to do for their customers and establishing a clear set of realistic expectations regarding performance and time spent on the job, sales managers may be able to substantially reduce emotional exhaustion and propensity to leave. For example, it may not be productive in the long-run to make heroes of the "80 hour a week" superstar salesperson. Holding this person up as a role model could cause employees to feel conflict between their non-work responsibilities and the firm's expectations about time spent on the job. The resulting conflict could be expected to be associated with higher levels of work related role stress, emotional exhaustion and lower job satisfaction for many individuals that try to match the superstar's performance. Perhaps a better role model is the salesperson who works "smarter not harder" (Sujan, Weitz, and Kumar 1994). Streamlining channels of communication within the organization also may help reduce work related role stress-again resulting in lower levels of emotional exhaustion and possibly having a positive effect on work-family conflict levels.

Sales managers can utilize several methods to mitigate negative effects of work-family conflict and emotional exhaustion on their organization. For all employees, realistic scheduling for each salesperson and increased autonomy in planning sales call schedules are ways management can help employees reduce conflict between work and home responsibilities. Some conflicts that occur between work and family requirements, particularly in a sales position that requires travel, can be reduced through utilization of scheduling and time-management skills. Seminars or classes could be offered to help a salesperson learn how to improve scheduling and manage time more effectively which also could reduce emotional exhaustion. Unfortunately, many time management programs are designed to improve personal performance, not to help people resolve work-family conflict or address the emotional exhaustion experienced by some employees. Another approach might involve providing access to child care for employees with children (either directly or indirectly through some level of economic support).

Future Research Implications

Future studies of role stress should explicitly consider possible effects of work-family conflict and emotional exhaustion if they are fully capture the full range workplace attitudes and behaviors that are affected by these constructs. Study results suggest several specific areas for future research. First, other types of sales positions, should be studied since some of the relationships between the constructs being examined appear to vary across employment settings. Second, comparing the effects of work-family conflict on various groups of individuals with varying levels of family responsibilities such as single, single-parent, married, and married with children, can help identify groups having the greatest level of work-related effects associated with work-family conflict. Studies also could attempt to identify those individuals having the greatest likelihood of suffering from emotional exhaustion.

Work-family conflict needs to be examined, in relation to other workplace attitudes such as job involvement, organizational commitment, or various components of job satisfaction to determine its full range of effects. Other potential areas for future research into the relationship between work and family domains include identifying additional work-related antecedents of work-family conflict. For example, the effect of supportive work environments and/or supportive home

environments on work-family conflict has not been thoroughly explored (Thomas and Ganster 1995).

There are limitations to the current study. This sample is from one firm selling a service to other businesses. Thus, results may not be generalizable to other sales positions. Another problem involves the cross-sectional nature of the data. Furthermore, gathering information at one point in time does not allow tests concerning the causal sequence of the relationships being examined. This is particularly important in relation to models containing possible mediating constructs. However, theoretical support exists, for the proposed ordering of model linkages.

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