# “The antecedents of salesperson deviant behavior: the role of work meaningfulness”


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# THE ANTECEDENTS OF SALESPERSON DEVIANT BEHAVIOR: THE ROLE OF WORK MEANINGFULNESS

## Abstract

Employees tend to engage in certain behavior, either good or deviant. Drawing from control theory, the employees' behavior will be controlled as the organization can fulfill their needs. The ultimate objective of the study is to examine how Salesperson-Organization Fit will affect job stress and, in turn, salesperson deviant behavior. Besides, this study also examined how employees' work meaningfulness moderates the relationship between job stress and workplace deviant behavior. This study employed hierarchical regression analysis and moderated regression analysis to test the hypotheses. Using 182 salespeople for both manufacturing and services companies, the results showed that Salesperson-Organization Fit negatively affects three types of deviant behavior: organizational deviance, interpersonal deviance, and frontline deviance. The results of this study also found a mixed result for job stress on deviant behavior. Job stress has a positive effect on organizational ($\beta = 0.092$; $p < 0.1$) and frontline deviance ($\beta = 0.092$; $p < 0.05$), while it has an insignificant effect on interpersonal deviance. Work meaningfulness only moderates the relationship between job stress and organizational deviance.

**Keywords** job stress, Salesperson-Organization Fit, deviant behavior

**JEL Classification** L29, M31, O15

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## INTRODUCTION

The ends justify the means. The employees tend to engage in unethical behavior to achieve the goal. Besides, the customers also feel insecure about their personal data since the employees, especially salespeople, perform the trading activities to sell customers' personal data. Furthermore, a survey by Gallup found out that the level of honesty and professionalism ethics for a salesperson is declining, with 45% on average in 2015, and fell to 41% by 2016 (www.news.gallup.com).

Currently, the researchers focus on workplace deviant behavior (WDB) either to examine its antecedents or outcomes. This study uses the basic elements of control theory, which explains how the fit between the organization and its employees will lessen the employees' WDB. In this study, the fit between the organization and its employees, especially salespeople, is referred to as Salesperson-Organization Fit (S-O Fit). Kristof (1996) argued there are two perspectives in explaining the fit between the employees and the organization: supplementary fit and need-supply. Supplementary fit refers to fits that occur since there are similar characteristics between the individual and the organization (Kristof, 1996), while need-supply refers to fits that occur since the organization can fulfill its employees' needs (Kristof, 1996). These two perspectives of



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P-O Fit are related to control theory, as the organization can fulfill its employees' needs, so the behavior of its employees is more controlled and, thus, will lessen the employees to engage in behavior that threatens the organization (Jelinek & Ahearne, 2013).

The objective of this study is twofold. First, this study examines how the fit between the employees and the organization affects WDB, which consists of organizational, interpersonal, and frontline deviance. Second, it also examines the moderating effect of work meaningfulness since employee who feels that his/her work is meaningful in his/her life will consider deviant behavior as a behavior that threatens him/her even in an adverse situation.

# 1. LITERATURE REVIEW AND HYPOTHESES

## 1.1. Salesperson-Organization Fit

Salesperson-Organization Fit refers to the assumption that the organization has unique characteristics that can fit in individual characteristics (Kristof, 1996). The term "Fit" refers to a fit between an individual and an organization. The S-O Fit is also often conceptualized as value congruence (T.-Y. Kim, Aryee, Loi, & S.-P. Kim, 2013) and goal congruence (Jung & Takeuchi, 2014). Besides, there are several definitions related to S-O Fit. First, as explained earlier, S-O Fit is divided into two perspectives: supplementary fit and need-supply and demand-ability (Kristof, 1996). From a supplementary fit perspective, conformity occurs when an individual fits up with the same characteristics as another in an organization (Kristof, 1996). On the contrary, the supplementary fit perspective suggests that conformity occurs when a salesperson's characteristics may supplement the organizational characteristics (Kristof, 1996). Second, S-O Fit can be explained from the perspective of need-supply and demand-ability since conformity occurs when the organization can satisfy the needs and wants of the individual (need-supply), and when the individual has the ability required to meet the demands of the organization (demand-ability). Kristof (1996) argued that several scholars tend to define S-O Fit from a single perspective, resulting in many versions of the definition for S-O Fit. Further, Kristof (1996) defined S-O Fit by integrating both perspectives; thus, S-O Fit is defined as the compatibility between an individual and an organization that occurs as

a) at least one party can meet other needs or

b) between the individual and the organization has the main characteristics which are similar or

c) when one party can meet the other's needs and the similarity of characteristics between individuals and organizations.

## 1.2. Job stress

Many situations and events in life contribute to stress. The main source of stress is time, which was spent in a situation (Faulkner & Patiar, 1997). As the individual cannot cope with the demand in his/her workplace, the conflict occurs between him/her and peers. Further, the conflict will lead to both physical and emotional dysfunctions in a workplace, which is called job stress. Job stress is defined as an individual's awareness or feeling of personal dysfunction because of working conditions (Parker & DeCotiis, 1983). Furthermore, this study emphasizes the definition in two dimensions. First, the definition of job stress as awareness or feeling indicates that the new conditions experienced may be considered stressful for the individual. Second, the phrase "personal dysfunction" states that the condition is perceived consciously abnormal and ultimately provides an inconvenience to the individual. Thus, the definition of job stress is no longer the trigger or stressor or consequence of the job stress itself, but rather focuses on the feelings of discomfort that the individual consciously feels. Therefore, this study focuses on the measurement of job stress as an uncomfortable condition that the individual, especially salesperson, consciously feels.

## 1.3. Workplace deviant behavior

WDB is a voluntary behavior that threatens the organization or its members' wellbeing or both (Robinson & Greenberg, 1998). There are several important points regarding the definition. First, the actor of WDB is the member or the employee of an organization. It reflects that WDB is conducted by the organization's members, not persons or individuals outside the organization or the former employees. Second, WDB is a voluntary behavior, which is based on the employees' behavior. Third, WDB threatens the organization's norms, procedures, and formal rules. It distinguishes WDB with another construct, such as unethical behavior, since WDB focuses on the employees' behavior, which threatens the organization's norms, while unethical behavior focuses on right or wrong and depends on law or justice perspectives (Robinson & Bennet, 1995). Fourth, WDB is voluntary behavior that threatens an organization and its members, so minor offense is not considered as WDB.

WDB is of two types: organizational and interpersonal. The main difference between those types is the object under threat (Robinson & Bennett, 1995). Organizational WDB refers to voluntary behavior, which threatens the organization, while interpersonal WDB refers to voluntary behavior, which threatens the organization's members or peers. Afterward, the type of WDB from the study of Robinson and Bennet (1995) is only consistent with the organizational context in general and cannot sufficiently describe WDB in the context of sales or salesperson (Jelinek & Ahearne, 2013). The salesperson is a unique occupation, which differs from other occupations, which have the freedom to interact with the customer and spend most of their time to get prospective customers. Since the salesperson spends most of their working hours, they are likely not only to engage in organizational and interpersonal WDB but also deviant behavior, which is associated with external consumers. Thus, Jelinek and Ahearne (2006) interpolated the WDB from Robinson and Bennet (1995), which consists of organizational, interpersonal, and frontline WDB.

## 1.4. Work meaningfulness

Work meaningfulness is a popular concept in the research, especially related to empowerment (Jelinek & Ahearne, 2006). Work meaningfulness, according to May et al. (2004), refers to the value or purpose of a job that relates to the standards of every individual. When employees feel that their work is very meaningful or following the standard or ideal, they tend to be more involved in the job. On the contrary, when the employees do not feel that their work is meaningful, they will disengage from work, and it will lower the motivation.

Employees who feel that their work is meaningful will have a better psychological adjustment ability and may continuously meet the qualifications expected by the organization (Steger, Dik, & Duffy, 2012). Besides, these employees will have better welfare (Arnold, Turner, Barling, Kelloway, & McKee, 2007) since they feel that their work is meaningful for their lives and is very important to them (Harpaz & Fu, 2002). For an employee, work meaningfulness not only provides growth and development but also is oriented towards satisfaction and happiness (Steger, Dik, & Duffy, 2012). It implies that employees who perceive their work as meaningful tend to assume that their work has contributed to the growth and development of their career. On a broader level, the managers who successfully convey work meaningfulness to employees will then be able to convince employees that they are valuable contributors to organizational goals and not just "pawn of the system". Based on this perspective, researchers argue that the work meaningfulness serves as an effective "barrier" and helps to reduce "provocation" (Robinson & Bennett, 1997).

Steger, Dik, and Duffy (2012) argued that work meaningfulness consists of several principles, namely positive meaning, meaning-making through work, and greater good motivation. Positive meaning emphasizes that work meaningfulness is a subjective experience that what is done by employees has personal meaningfulness. This principle must be included in the measurements to capture the essence that employees value their work as important and meaningful. Second, the principle of meaning-making through work implies that when employees perceive their work meaningfulness, they may also perceive the meaningfulness of their life (Steger, Dik, & Duffy, 2012). Work meaningfulness helps employees to understand themselves and their surroundings better to provide growth opportunities. Finally, according


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to the third principle, work meaningfulness may also affect other people positively (Steger & Dik, 2010).

## 1.5. Hypotheses

Drawing from control theory, when a company can meet the needs of its employees, the employee will feel more controlled so it will lessen the tendency to do something distorted (Jelinek & Ahearne, 2010). Based on the definition of Salesperson-Organization Fit, from the need-supply perspective, the fit between the individual and the organization will occur when the organization can satisfy or meet the needs and wants of individuals (Kristoff, 1996). Thus, "Fit" or conformity in this study is defined as the employee's needs that the organization should satisfy. When employees feel that they are in an organization or a company, which can satisfy their needs, the employees will feel more controlled so as to minimize the desire to violate the rules or norms that exist within the company. Besides, when employees feel their needs are met and become more controlled, it will also minimize the desire to be hostile to colleagues and less likely to complain about work and organization to customers. Thus,

*H1: Salesperson-Organization Fit is negatively related to (a) organizational, (b) interpersonal, and (c) frontline WDB.*

Drawing from role stress model (Behrman & Perreault Jr., 1984) and coping theory (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), the increase of accumulated stress levels will lead to the increase of deviant behavior as a form of reaction to injustice perceived by organization's members, especially the salespeople (Jackson & Schuler, 1985). Stress leads to the insecurity that triggers the employees to deviant behavior: organizational deviance, interpersonal deviance, and frontline deviance (Hwang, Lee, Park, Chang, & Kim, 2014). Eschleman, Bowling, and LaHuis (2014) argued that there is a positive relationship between job stress and counterproductive workplace behavior (CWB) at both the interpersonal and organizational levels. A conflict between the employee and peers will lead to stress, which increases the likelihood of deviant behavior, especially related to deviant behavior on the interpersonal level. This is consistent with results of a study by Eschleman, Bowling, and LaHuis (2014): "when a person experiences interpersonal barriers, i.e., conflict with a co-worker, it will increase the likelihood of a backlash, as well as when individuals experience organizational obstacles that will affect employee's well-being." The study of Bruk-Lee and Spector (2006) revealed that workplace stressors such as conflict with supervisors and conflict with co-workers would have different outcomes. Conflict with supervisors will further increase the likelihood of employees to behave defiantly towards the organization because employees feel that the supervisor acts as the representative of the organization (Bruk-Lee & Spector, 2006). Conflict with co-workers will make the individual behave defiantly toward the co-worker. In other words, Bruk-Lee and Spector (2006) argue that each conflict will make employees behave defiantly toward their conflict's opponents. Thus,

*H2: Job stress is positively related to (a) organizational, (b) interpersonal, and (c) frontline WDB.*

When an employee feels that his/her job is very meaningful or following their standard or ideal, the employee will tend to be more involved in the job. Conversely, when many employees do not feel the work meaningfulness, they will disengage from work and it will lessen his/her motivation. Managers who successfully convey the meaning of work to employees will be able to convince employees that they are valuable contributors to organizational goals and not just "pawn of the system". Based on this perspective, work meaningfulness serves as an "obstacle", which is effective and helps to reduce "provocation" (Robinson & Bennett, 1997). When salespeople experience a high level of stress, it will make them be involved in various deviant behavior. However, when they perceive that their work is more than gratification and happiness, it provides growth and development of their careers (Steger, Dik, & Duffy, 2012) and the tendency of salespeople to engage in deviant behavior will decrease. The salespeople who feel that the work is meaningful will tend not to behave defiantly than those who do not feel the work meaningfulness. Thus,

*H3: Work meaningfulness moderates the relationship between job stress and (a) organizational, (b) interpersonal, and (c) frontline WDB.*

# 2. METHODS

## 2.1. Sample and procedures

After an online survey of salespeople during three months using Google Forms, 82 usable responses were obtained for further analysis. The final sample was 52.2% in manufacturing companies and 47.8% in services. The average age of the respondents was 26.7 years old, with 2 years' tenure. The sample consisted of 62.6% males and 37.4% females. The average organization tenure of respondents was 2.55 years.

## 2.2. Measures

All measures used a response scale from 1 ("strongly disagree") to 7 ("strongly agree"). Salesperson-Organization Fit was measured by Kristof's (1996) seven-items (α = 0.92). Organizational deviance was measured by Jelinek and Ahearne's (2006) four-items (α = 0.815). Interpersonal deviance was measured by Jelinek and Ahearne's (2006) five-items (α=0.92). Frontline deviance was measured by Jelinek and Ahearne's (2006) three-items (α = 0.89). Job stress was measured by Parker and DeCotiis' (1983) 13-items (α = 0.932) and work meaningfulness was measured by Steger, Dik, and Duffy's (2012) seven-items (α = 0.95).

# 3. RESULTS

Several methods were used to test the hypotheses. First, *H1* was tested by using a single ordinary least square (OLS) regression for Salesperson-Organization Fit and job stress. Second, *H3* was tested through moderated regression analysis by entering the control variables, which consist of age, gender (male and female), tenure, and type of industry (manufacturing and services). Then, Salesperson-Organization Fit was entered as an independent variable and workplace deviant behavior as a dependent variable. Next, this study employed the centered score (mean-centered) for job stress. After mean-centered for job stress was entered, the centered score (mean-centered) for work meaningfulness was entered. Last, the interaction term for the work meaningfulness with job stress was entered. The current study used the centered score to create interaction to improve the interpretation of interaction or moderating effect.

The beta weight for Salesperson-Organization fit was statistically significant and negative in predicting the organization's deviant behavior ($p < 0.01$), thus supporting hypothesis 1a. The beta weight for Salesperson-Organization Fit was statistically significant and negative in predicting interpersonal deviance, thus supporting hypothesis 1b. Hypothesis 1c was also supported since the beta weight for salesperson-organization fit was also negative and statistically significant.

This study shows the mixed result for job stress and workplace deviant behavior. Job stress was statistically significant in predicting organizational and frontline deviance (β = 0.092, $p < 0.1$ and β = 0.091, $p < 0.05$) so hypotheses 2a and 2c were supported. On the contrary, job stress was not statistically sig-

**Table 1.** Regression results predicting organizational deviance

| Predictor variables | Model 1 | Model 2 | Model 3 | Model 4 | Model 5 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | β | β | β | β | β |
| Age | −0.041* | −0.14 | −0.10 | −0.010 | −0.10 |
| Gender | −0.276 | −0.364* | −0.353* | −0.353* | −0.318* |
| Tenure | 0.006 | −0.007 | −0.11 | −0.011 | −0.009 |
| Type of organization | −0.84 | −0.238 | −0.230 | −0.230 | −0.244*** |
| Salesperson-Organization Fit | – | −0.352** | −0.322** | −0.325** | 0.311 |
| Job stress | – | – | 0.092*** | 0.092*** | 0.083*** |
| Work meaningfulness | – | – | – | 0.004 | 0.504* |
| Job stress x Work meaningfulness | – | – | – | – | −0.110** |
| F | 2.323* | 8,985** | 8.302** | 7.223** | 7.484** |
| $R^2$ | 0.062 | 0.235 | 0.250 | 0.250 | 0.281 |

*Note:* * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.1$.



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**Table 2.** Regression results predicting interpersonal deviance

| Predictor variables | Model 1 | Model 2 | Model 3 | Model 4 | Model 5 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | β | β | β | β | β |
| Age | –0.032*** | –0.011 | –0.10 | –0.011 | –0.011 |
| Gender | –0.190 | –0.256*** | –0.256*** | –0.259*** | –0.244*** |
| Tenure | 0.049 | 0.053 | –0.052 | 0.054 | 0.55*** |
| Type of organization | 0.002 | –0.119 | –0.117 | –0.118 | –0.124 |
| Salesperson-Organization Fit | – | –0.277** | –0.267** | –0.072 | 0.193 |
| Job stress | – | – | 0.028 | 0.024 | 0.20 |
| Work meaningfulness | – | – | – | –0.264 | –0.056 |
| Job stress x Work meaningfulness | – | – | – | – | –0.046 |
| F | 2.328* | 6.733** | 5.799** | 6.358** | 5.823** |
| $R^2$ | 0.062 | 0.188 | 0.189 | 0.227 | 0.234 |

*Note:* * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.1$.

**Table 3.** Regression results predicting frontline deviance

| Predictor variables | Model 1 | Model 2 | Model 3 | Model 4 | Model 5 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | β | β | β | β | β |
| Age | –0.028 | 0.005 | 0.009 | 0.007 | 0.07 |
| Gender | –0.207 | –0.314* | –0.304* | –0.308* | –0.314* |
| Tenure | 0.03 | 0.10 | 0.005 | 0.008 | 0.008 |
| Type of organization | 0.111 | –0.078 | –0.071 | –0.072 | –0.070 |
| Salesperson-Organization Fit | – | –0.431** | –0.401** | –0.122 | –0.216 |
| Job stress | – | – | 0.091* | 0.085* | 0.087 |
| Work meaningfulness | – | – | – | –0.377** | –0.451* |
| Job stress x Work meaningfulness | – | – | – | – | 0.016 |
| F | 2.298* | 14.787** | 13.498** | 15.775** | 13.982** |
| $R^2$ | 0.061 | 0.336 | 0.352 | 0.422 | 0.423 |

*Note:* * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.1$.

nificant in predicting interpersonal deviance; thus, hypothesis 2b was not supported.

The interaction between work meaningfulness and job stress also shows mixed results. Work meaningfulness only moderates the relationship between job stress and organizational deviance ($\beta = -0.110$, $p < 0.05$), supporting hypothesis 3a. Conversely, work meaningfulness was not significant as a moderator in the relationship between job stress and interpersonal and frontline deviance. Thus, hypotheses 3b and 3c were not supported.

## 4. DISCUSSION

The study examined the effects of Salesperson-Organization Fit, job stress, and work meaningfulness on organizational, interpersonal, and frontline deviance. There were nine hypotheses in this study, of which three hypotheses were supported statistically. Thus, the discussion focused more on the unsupported hypotheses.

First, this study failed to support prior results that job stress is positively related to interpersonal deviance. The reason underlying this finding is that job stress in this study was measured as the level of stress being perceived by employees regarding their jobs. In general, job stress is categorized as an organizational stressor (Fox, Spector, & Miles, 2001); therefore, it was more closely associated with organizational than personal or interpersonal deviance. As employees perceived the stress that occurred from their jobs, they tend to blame the organization for setting unrealistic sales goal to achieve. Besides, if the organization sets an unrealistic sales goal, all the employees also experience the same thing, so employees are less likely to consider his/her peers as the object of deviance.

Second, work meaningfulness did not moderate the relationship between job stress, interpersonal

deviance, and frontline deviance. Employees tend to perceive interpersonal and frontline deviance to have an insignificant effect on their employment status, unlike the organizational deviance, which has greater consequences, i.e., the employee will lose current job because his/her behavior violates the organization's norms. Besides, the salesperson perceives that work meaningfulness may not relate to people but organization or employees. There are two types of interpersonal counterproductive workplace behavior: person-focused and task-focused. The respondents may not distinguish between person-focused and task-focused (Ho, 2012). Furthermore, the average tenure of the respondents was two years, which is less likely that they have an interpersonal conflict or may avoid conflict with colleagues or peers. A study from Ho (2012) suggested that as interpersonal conflict occurs, the employee may use both types of behaviors, person-focused and task-focused, as an impingement of dislike toward others.

This study implies that as employees perceived a high level of job stress, they tend to engage in deviant behavior, especially organizational deviance, but as employees perceived a high level of work meaningfulness, it diminished the positive effect of job stress on organizational deviance. On the contrary, as employees may perceive a high level of job stress, they tend to engage in frontline and interpersonal deviance since the effect of these two deviant behaviors does not significantly affect the employment status. Besides, the salesperson realizes that job stress occurs as an organizational stressor, i.e., unrealistic sales goal; therefore, they may not blame their colleagues or customers.

There are several limitations and suggestions for future research. First, this study did not test whether the types of industry may affect the employees' tendency toward workplace deviant behavior. Second, to further analyze the interpersonal deviance, one suggests employing Ho's categorization of interpersonal deviance, namely person-focused and task-focused (Ho, 2012). Third, one realizes that this study is susceptible to social desirability bias (SDB), although anonymous online survey was employed; thus, future research may employ a different type of survey, especially for measuring workplace deviant behavior in order to minimize the bias.

## CONCLUSION

Salesperson-Organization Fit negatively affects all types of workplace deviant behavior, which consists of organization deviance, interpersonal deviance, and frontline deviance. On the contrary, the results failed to support a prior study that job stress is positively related to interpersonal deviance, while work meaningfulness only moderates the relationship between job stress and organizational deviance. This study contributes to resolving the relationship between Salesperson-Organization Fit, which derives from Salesperson-Organization Fit theory, and all types of deviant behaviors. It implies that the more organization is able to meet the employee's need, the more it will decrease employees' deviant behavior. Besides, work meaningfulness will diminish the effect of job stress on workplace deviant behavior, but only on organizational deviance.

There are several limitations and suggestions for future research. First, the current study did not test whether the types of the industry may affect the employees' tendency toward workplace deviant behavior. Second, in order to further analyze the interpersonal deviance, this study suggests employing Ho's categorization of interpersonal deviance, namely person-focused and task-focused (Ho, 2012). Third, this study is susceptible of social desirability bias (SDB), even though it already employed online anonymous survey; thus, future research may employ a different type of survey, especially for measuring workplace deviant behavior in order to minimize the bias.

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