The Impact of Perceived Organizational Support on the Relationship Between Boundary Spanner Role Stress and Work Outcomes

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This study examines the impact of perceived organizational support (POS) on the relationship between boundary spanner role stressors (i.e., role conflict and role ambiguity) and both work attitudes (i.e., job satisfaction and intent to remain) and behavior (i.e., task performance). Results indicate that POS has strong effects on role ambiguity and role conflict, as well as job satisfaction and intent to remain. However, POS is not related to task performance in our sample. POS also has moderating effects on several role stress—outcome relations. The paper discusses the implication of these findings for managers, along with recommendations for future research.

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In order to maintain competitiveness, many organizations require their employees to assume greater and more widely prescribed work responsibilities. The pressure related to undertaking broader job duties may lead employees to experience greater levels of stress related to their work roles. Unfortunately, existing research (e.g., French & Kahn, 1962; Kahn, Wolfe, Quinn & Snoek, 1964) indicates that role stress is strongly associated with both short (e.g., physiological, attitudinal, and behavioral) and long (e.g., chronic disease and health issues, turnover) term negative employee outcomes. In addition, there is increasing concern about the negative effects of employee stress upon the firm itself, such as...
decreased job performance and increased employee health care costs. Accordingly, understanding and reducing employee role stress is of growing importance to both managers and researchers.

In their extensive summary of research on workplace stress, Kahn and Byosiere (1992: 572) concluded that “(o)rganizational theory and research have been too little concerned with organizational and interpersonal factors that might serve as moderators, buffers, or even as antidotes to stresses and their effects,” and that empirical evidence in this area is essentially nonexistent. Subsequent researchers addressed this oversight, primarily by focusing on the potential moderating role of personal factors (e.g., personality characteristics; Brief, Burke, George, Robinson & Weber, 1988; Burke, Brief & George, 1993) and interpersonal (e.g., family and friends) sources of support (e.g., Fisher, 1985; Ganster, Fusilier & Mayes, 1986; Kaufman & Beehr, 1986). However, few researchers have investigated the role of organizational factors in alleviating the deleterious effects of employee role stress. The purpose of this research is to examine the potential of one such organizational factor, perceived organizational support (POS), to both directly reduce employee role stress and attenuate the negative relation between role stress and work outcomes.

Study Context

The extant role stress literature describes many examples of work situations and responsibilities that are associated with increased employee stress. A potentially significant factor was noted by both Kahn et al. (1964) and Singh (1993), who observed that those employees who operate between the firm and its environment are particularly prone to role stress. These employees, commonly referred to as boundary spanners (Bowen & Schneider, 1985; Weatherly & Tansik, 1993), represent a distinct and expanding proportion of many firms’ labor forces (Babin & Boles, 1996), and include positions such as customer service representatives, professional buyers, service/repair technicians, retail employees, delivery personnel, and particularly salespeople (e.g., McNeilly & Russ, 1992; Russ, McNeilly, Comer & Light, 1998; Singh, Verbeke & Rhoads, 1996).

It is important to study the unique nature of boundary spanning employees’ work environments and tasks, given that their job-related experiences are often quite different from those investigated in prior research studies (e.g., the experiences of manufacturing workers). For example, boundary spanners often spend much of their time directly interacting with customers and addressing their often highly variable, complex, and distinctive needs. In addition, because boundary spanners often operate away from the firm, extensively handle non-routine tasks, and experience different role expectations, they are likely to experience high levels of uncertainty and conflict. Consequently, boundary spanners’ reactions to various work experiences may also be distinct from patterns found in past research efforts. This is important because the manner in which boundary spanners interact with customers (e.g., the degree to which they are friendly, tactful, prompt, knowledgeable, effective, etc.) strongly affects the customer’s impression of the firm, and thus, the customer’s intent to continue to trade with that firm. Given these reasons, we believe that boundary spanners offer a unique and pertinent context in which to study role stress and work outcomes.
Literature Review and Hypotheses

Role Stress

Past research empirically demonstrates that boundary-spanning activities are strongly related to employee role stress (e.g., Miles & Perreault, 1976; Singh, 1993; Singh & Rhoads, 1991; Weatherly & Tansik, 1993). Two important types of role stress are role ambiguity, defined as a lack of clarity regarding role expectations, and role conflict, defined as role expectations that conflict with one another (Rizzo, House & Lirtzmann, 1970). These role stressors have been found to be consistently and negatively related to a variety of important employee job outcomes such as performance (e.g., Jackson & Schuler, 1985; Tubre & Collins, 2000) and work attitudes such as job satisfaction (e.g., Caplan, Cobb & French, 1975; Churchill, Ford & Walker, 1974; La Rocco, House & French, 1980). Therefore, in order to maintain quality customer interactions and thus competitiveness, it is particularly important for organizations to enact processes that reduce the amount of work-related stress that boundary spanners may experience.

One way to cope with role stress is through increased social support (e.g., Fisher, 1985; Kaufman & Beehr, 1986). In the work environment, social support has been commonly operationalized as the support or aid granted by coworkers and/or supervisors (e.g., Ganster et al., 1986; La Rocco et al., 1980). However, researchers are conflicted as to how social support affects the stressor-strain relationship. Several past studies suggest that social support may exert main effects to reduce both stressors and outcomes (e.g., Beehr, 1985; Kraimer, Wayne & Jaworski, 2001). In addition, many studies have examined possible intervening effects associated with social support (e.g., Carlson & Perrewe, 1999; Seers, McGee, Serey & Graen, 1983). To clarify these findings, Viswesvaran, Sanchez and Fisher (1999) conducted a meta-analysis to determine which, if any, of four possible stressor-support-strain models were empirically supported. Their findings provide evidence that social support may either directly reduce stressors (such as role conflict and ambiguity), or moderate the stressor-strain relationship by acting as a buffer that reduces the effects of the stressors on the outcomes or strains (e.g., job dissatisfaction). Given these results, we designed our study to examine both main and moderating effects of support. However, since Kahn and Byosiere (1992) call for research on the influence of sources of support other than coworkers and supervisors, we chose to focus on the potentially important impact of support granted by the firm itself.

Perceived Organizational Support

Perceived organizational support (POS) is defined as the extent to which employees perceive that their contributions are valued by their organization and that the firm cares about their well-being (Eisenberger, Fasolo & Davis-LaMastro, 1990; Eisenberger, Huntington, Hutchison & Sowa, 1986; Wayne, Shore & Liden, 1997). Usually associated with Blau’s (1964) social exchange theory, which argues that employees will trade their efforts for the promise of material and personal rewards that the organization may offer in the future, POS is thought to develop over time through multiple interactions between employees and their employers and to reflect the degree to which employees perceive that their work
organizations are committed to them. In regard to social support, Kraimer et al. (2001) argued that POS constitutes a viable source of support for employees since it encompasses the three types of social support (i.e., aid, affect, and affirmation).

There is considerable theoretical and empirical support for the notion that POS acts both to directly reduce and buffer against the negative effects of role stress on important employee work outcomes. First, high levels of POS may be negatively associated with both role ambiguity and role conflict for boundary spanning employees. The definition of perceived organizational support suggests that organizations differ in the relationships they choose to develop with employees. Organizations that care about employees’ well-being are more likely to reduce unnecessary work complications and distractions for their workers, such as conflicting job requirements. Also, these companies are more likely to specify and clarify job expectations and norms for their employees, in order to better prepare them for work assignments (i.e., the ‘aid’ type of support listed above). These arguments are consistent with the findings of Guzzo, Noonan and Elron (1994), and Wayne et al. (1997), who conclude that employee perceptions of organizational support develop through various organizational policies and practices. Empirically, Jones, Flynn and Kelloway (1995) show that POS is negatively related to levels of work stress, and Babakus, Cravens, Johnson and Moncrief (1996) report that salespeople with high levels of POS also experience less role conflict. Thus, firms that care about employee welfare and value work contributions are likely to send signals of support to employees by eliminating work factors associated with both role conflict and role ambiguity. Therefore, we hypothesize:

**Hypothesis 1:** POS is negatively related to: (a) role conflict, (b) role ambiguity.

Perceived organizational support may also directly affect work outcomes through the signals the company sends regarding the employees’ work contributions (Michaels & Dixon, 1994). Eisenberger et al. (1986) suggest that POS is “… influenced by various aspects of an employee’s treatment by the organization, (including) the frequency, extremity, and judged sincerity of statements of praise and approval … pay, rank, job enrichment, and influence over organizational policies” (p. 501). Perceiving that the company values the employee’s contribution may indicate that the organization regards the employee as performing at an acceptable and desirable level. This signal may subsequently result in a positive attitude towards both the job (i.e., satisfaction) and the firm (i.e., intent to remain), as well as increase the desire to perform at a high level. This is consistent with social exchange theory (Blau, 1964), which posits that the employee will experience a need to reciprocate (Gouldner, 1960) for high levels of POS, possibly with positive job attitudes and behaviors (e.g., Eisenberger et al., 1986, 1990).

There is strong empirical support linking POS to important job outcomes. Babakus et al. (1996) found that POS is positively associated with job satisfaction, whereas several researchers (Eisenberger et al., 1990; Guzzo et al., 1994; Wayne et al., 1997) consistently linked POS with high levels of organizational commitment, which implies intent to remain with the company. In addition, Eisenberger and colleagues reported that POS is positively related to job performance (Eisenberger et al., 1986, 1990). However, the results of the POS-job performance link are somewhat inconsistent. In an attempt to clarify past findings, Wayne, Shore, Bommer and Tetrick (2002) distinguished task performance from
organizational citizenship behavior (e.g., Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Moorman & Fetter, 1990) and found differential prediction for these two types of performance. Specifically, whereas POS strongly predicted citizenship behavior, it did not predict task performance ratings. However, given the inconsistencies in the literature and the arguments delineated above, we hypothesize:

Hypothesis 2: POS is positively related to: (a) job satisfaction, (b) intent to remain, and (c) task performance.

While there is a large amount of indirect evidence suggesting that POS will buffer the role stress-outcome relationship, few researchers have directly examined this possible moderation effect. Several researchers (e.g., Carlson & Perrewe, 1999; La Rocco et al., 1980; Parasuraman, Greenhaus & Granrose, 1992) argue that social support reduces the negative effects of role stressors on various work outcomes by helping employees cope with the stress. However, these studies focused on coworker and supervisor support, not POS. In addition, empirical findings for the moderation effect of social support have been inconsistent (Viswesvaran et al., 1999). One study that did investigate an indirect effect is Hutchison (1997), who found that POS fully mediates the relationship between both role ambiguity and role conflict with organizational commitment. However, he did not examine possible POS moderation.

We located three studies that specifically examined the potential of POS to moderate a work stress-outcome relationship. Leather, Lawrence, Beale, Cox and Dickson (1998) concluded that POS moderates the negative effect of workplace violence (a work stressor) on both job satisfaction and organizational commitment, while George, Reed, Ballard, Colin and Fielding (1993) report that both organizational and social support moderate the negative relationship between exposure to AIDS patients and negative employee mood. Neither of these studies, however, examines the possibility that POS may help to buffer the effects of role stress on work outcomes. The third study is a closer reflection of the current study, in that Casper, Martin, Buffardi and Erdwins (2002) found that POS moderated the work-family conflict–organizational commitment association. However, this research does not specifically examine the relations hypothesized in the current study.

Theoretically, perceived organizational support may act to attenuate the role stress-work outcome relationship because employees see POS as type of coping mechanism. In other words, support provided by the organization may not only help eliminate a certain amount of role stress experienced by boundary spanners (as hypothesized above), but also may buffer the negative effects of role stress that cannot be removed due to the nature of the job tasks. This is particularly important in the case of boundary spanner employees, whose jobs typically include large amounts of ambiguity and conflict. Therefore, we hypothesize:

Hypothesis 3: POS decreases the negative relationship between role ambiguity and: (a) job satisfaction, (b) intent to remain, and (c) task performance.

Hypothesis 4: POS decreases the negative relationship between role conflict and: (a) job satisfaction, (b) intent to remain, and (c) task performance.
Methods

Sample

Data were collected from a sample of boundary spanning salespeople. One of the authors attended the annual meeting of the Sales and Marketing Executives International and discussed the research project with mid- and upper-level sales practitioners in attendance. In return for a summary of the findings, five sales managers from five different firms agreed to distribute questionnaire forms and a stamped return envelope to their salespeople. Throughout the data gathering, respondents were clearly notified that their answers would remain anonymous and that they were not required to participate.

Of the 400 questionnaires distributed, 235 were returned directly to the researchers (a 59% response rate). Before pooling and analyzing the data, means tests determined that there were no significant differences between salespeople employed by the five firms in terms of age, years of selling experience, years with their current employer, gender, type of pay plan, or educational level. The final sample was seventy-five percent male with a mean age of 41 years, 11.5 years of selling experience, and almost 5 years experience with their current employer. Thirty-five percent had earned a bachelor’s degree and almost twelve percent had completed some graduate-level education.

Measures

All independent variable scales consisted of self-report items utilizing 7-point Likert-type ratings ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). These scales were refined through a confirmatory factor analysis, which resulted in the removal of items from each scale to increase model fit (see details in the data analyses section below). Based on the results of the CFA, perceived organizational support was measured using six items from the scale developed by Eisenberger et al. (1986). Sample items include “This firm cares about my opinions” and “This firm really cares about my well-being” (α = .94). Items measuring role conflict and role ambiguity were taken from Rizzo et al. (1970). Based on the results of the CFA, four items were used to measure role conflict (e.g., “I sometimes have to ignore rules to complete assignments”; (α = .78) and four items measured role ambiguity (e.g., “I know what all of my responsibilities are”; reverse-coded; α = .91). Jackson and Schuler (1985) pointed out a number of concerns with the measurement of these two constructs, including construct validity issues. However, using structural equation modeling, several researchers have subsequently found evidence of construct validity for the Rizzo et al. (1970) measures (e.g., Gonzalez-Roma & Lloret, 1998; Kelloway & Barling, 1990; Netemeyer, Johnston & Burton, 1990).

Given the composition of the sample, items measuring boundary spanner work outcomes were taken from the marketing literature. The two work attitudes measured, job satisfaction and intent to remain, both used 7-point Likert-type ratings ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). Job satisfaction was assessed using four items from the INDSALES scale (Churchill et al., 1974; e.g., “As a salesperson, I feel that my job is interesting”; α = .88), and intent to remain was measured using four items from Hunt, Chonko and...
Wood (1985; e.g., “I would be willing to change companies if the new job offered more status”; reverse-coded; \( \alpha = .84 \)).

To measure salesperson task performance, six items from the widely accepted Behrman and Perreault (1982) self-report scale were used. This scale was developed due to the lack of consensus in the sales literature regarding the best manner to measure sales performance. Difficulties in objectively measuring this construct arise due to variance in factors that affect sales task performance that are beyond the salesperson’s control, such as the quality of assigned territory, product lines, customers, and economic conditions. Behrman and Perreault (1982) concluded that quantitative measures solely dependent upon dollar or unit sales would not reflect these important variables that affect salesperson task performance, and so self-report measures should be used to more appropriately represent the construct. This sentiment was also supported by the work of Harris and Schaubroeck (1988).

Churchill, Ford, Hartley and Walker (1985) subsequently concluded that this self-report measure does not appear to suffer from a tendency of salespeople to inflate reported performance, and Boroom and Ramsey (1995) found that items from this scale are highly correlated with managerial ratings of sales performance (\( r = .65 \)). In addition, Babakus et al. (1996) and Challagalla and Shervani (1996) both reported acceptable levels of unidimensionality, reliability, and convergent and discriminant validity for this scale. Thus, given its wide acceptance and demonstrated psychometric soundness in the sales literature, this measure of task performance was used in the current study. Salespeople were asked to assign themselves to one of five categories, ranging from the “first 30%” to the “top 1%” of performers on each item (e.g., “identifying and selling to large volume accounts in my territory”; \( \alpha = .96 \)).

**Data Analysis**

Prior to hypothesis testing, the full information saturated measurement model was analyzed using the covariance matrix generated by PRELIS 2.5 as input to LISREL 8.52. Each of the completely standardized loadings relating an item to its assigned construct exceeded .59 and is significant (\( t \)-value > 2.0), thereby indicating acceptable convergent validity. Next chi-square tests for discriminant validity between all constructs were conducted and sufficient discrimination between all possible pairs of constructs was found. The full measurement model fits the data well: \( \chi^2(335) = 490.29 \) (\( p = .00 \)), CFI = .98, NNFI (TLI) = .98, standardized RMR = .047, RMSEA = .041, \( p \)-value for test of close fit (RMSEA < .05) = .95. Table 1 reports the completely standardized item loadings for the model.

Also before examining the hypothesized relations, the degree of multicollinearity between all independent variables was examined using the variable inflation factor (VIF). The degree of multicollinearity between all the constructs in this study (VIF ranged from 1.05 for gender to 1.85 for years of experience—both control variables) was found to be well below the allowable maximum (10; Neter, Wasserman & Kutner, 1989). The variables of focus (i.e., ambiguity, conflict, and POS) had consistent VIFs of 1.2–1.3, well below the cutoff of 10. Therefore, we can conclude that distinct interpretations of the associations between the variables are allowed in our study.
Table 1
Completely standardized item loadings for measurement model

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Loading</th>
<th>Item</th>
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<tr>
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<td>POS1</td>
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<td>Job satisfaction2</td>
<td>.88</td>
<td>POS2</td>
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<td>.88</td>
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<tr>
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<td>.70</td>
<td>Role ambiguity2</td>
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<td>Job performance1</td>
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<td>Job performance3</td>
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<td>Role conflict1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Job performance6</td>
<td>.78</td>
<td>Role conflict4</td>
<td>.74</td>
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Hierarchical (Hypotheses 1 and 2) and moderated regression analyses (Hypotheses 3 and 4) were used to test for the hypothesized relationships (Cohen & Cohen, 1983). Due to possible empirical relationships (as established in past research) with the dependent variables in the current study, age (related to intent to remain, e.g., Finegold, Mohrman & Spreitzer, 2002), gender (related to job performance and turnover, e.g., Hochwater, Ferris, Canty, Frink, Perrewe & Berkson, 2001), work experience (related to job performance and intent to quit, e.g., Wayne et al., 1997) and organizational tenure (related to POS and intent to quit, e.g., Wayne et al., 1997) were used as control variables. Control variables were entered into the predictor equation in the first step. To test the direct relationships, the appropriate independent variable(s) were entered into the equation in the second step. To test for moderation, interaction terms were created (i.e., POS × conflict and POS × ambiguity) and entered into the equations in a third step to determine the amount of additional variance (i.e., \( \Delta R^2 \)) explained by the interaction.

Procedures described by Cohen and Cohen (1983) and recommended by Aiken and West (1991) were used as guidelines for conducting simple slope tests and plotting significant interactions. Simple slopes tests indicated that betas in the regression equations for low and high levels of POS (±1 standard deviation from mean) were significantly different than zero for role ambiguity predicting both job satisfaction (high: \( t = -6.02, \text{sig} = .00 \); low: \( t = -8.22, \text{sig} = .00 \)) and intent to remain (high: \( t = -2.18, \text{sig} = .03 \); low: \( t = 2.05, \text{sig} = .04 \)), as well as role conflict predicting intent to remain (high: \( t = -3.53, \text{sig} = .000 \); low: \( t = -4.46, \text{sig} = .00 \)) and task performance (high: \( t = 3.14, \text{sig} = .00 \); low: \( t = 3.52, \text{sig} = .00 \)). However, the high and low POS condition lines for role conflict predicting job satisfaction were both not significantly different than zero (high: \( t = -1.83, \text{sig} = .07 \); low: \( t = 1.57, \text{sig} = .12 \)), although the slope indicators were in opposition to each other (i.e., the slope of the high condition line was negative, and the low condition slope was positive). Finally, in order to obtain fairly equal cell sizes in the trichotomization of the independent variables for plotting interaction lines, slight variation from the general model (mean and ±1 standard deviation) was required.
Results

Means, standard deviations, and correlations among the variables are presented in Table 2. A few of the correlations need to be recognized for their inconsistency with prior research. Specifically, while role ambiguity was negatively related to job satisfaction ($r = -0.58$, $p \leq 0.001$) and task performance ($r = -0.25$, $p \leq 0.001$), it was not significantly associated with intent to remain with the organization ($r = -0.06$, ns). Likewise, role conflict was negatively related to intent to remain ($r = -0.35$, $p \leq 0.001$) but did not have a significant relation with job satisfaction ($r = -0.08$, ns). In addition, role conflict had a positive association with task performance ($r = 0.16$, $p \leq 0.05$). The lack of consistency between these results and prior research findings brings into question the generalizability of past studies, and strongly indicates the need to separately investigate the types and effects of role stress experienced by various employees.

Results of the hierarchical regression analyses show that perceived organizational support has a strong negative relationship with both role conflict ($\Delta F = 19.52$, $p \leq 0.001$, $\beta = -0.29$, $R^2 = 0.12$) and role ambiguity ($\Delta F = 34.48$, $p \leq 0.001$, $\beta = -0.38$, $R^2 = 0.15$). Similarly, POS strongly predicts job satisfaction ($\Delta F = 30.55$, $p \leq 0.001$, $\beta = 0.36$, $R^2 = 0.14$) and intent to remain ($\Delta F = 17.97$, $p \leq 0.001$, $\beta = 0.28$, $R^2 = 0.10$). However, the data did not indicate a significant association between POS and task performance ($\Delta F = 2.21$, $p \geq 0.05$). Therefore, while Hypothesis 1 was supported in our sample, Hypothesis 2 received mixed support (see Table 3).

Results of the moderated regression analyses (see Table 4) indicate that POS buffers the negative relation between role ambiguity and job satisfaction ($\Delta F = 11.38$, $p \leq 0.001$, $\beta = 0.46$, $R^2 = 0.39$) as well as that between role conflict and intent to remain ($\Delta F = 4.61$, $p \leq 0.05$, $\beta = 0.38$, $R^2 = 0.20$). A particularly interesting finding was that while POS also

<table>
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<th>Variable</th>
<th>Mean</th>
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<td>.24***</td>
<td>0.16*</td>
<td>.93</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: Bold numbers on the diagonal are coefficient alphas.

* $p < .05$.
** $p < .01$.
*** $p < .001$. 

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Table 3
Hierarchical regression results for Hypotheses 1 and 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Step</th>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Role conflict</th>
<th>Role ambiguity</th>
<th>Job satisfaction</th>
<th>Intent to remain</th>
<th>Job performance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>.11**</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>−.08</td>
<td>−.10</td>
<td>.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Age</td>
<td>−.16</td>
<td>−.04</td>
<td>−.07</td>
<td>−.01</td>
<td>−.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Years experience</td>
<td>.22∗</td>
<td>.07</td>
<td>.10</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>.29***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Tenure</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>−.10</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>.10</td>
<td>.16∗</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>.01</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>.11</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>F</td>
<td>2.42∗</td>
<td>.73</td>
<td>.72</td>
<td>1.37</td>
<td>6.49***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>POS</td>
<td>−.29***</td>
<td>−.38***</td>
<td>.36***</td>
<td>.28***</td>
<td>.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>ΔR²</td>
<td>.08</td>
<td>.14</td>
<td>.12</td>
<td>.08</td>
<td>.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>ΔF</td>
<td>19.52***</td>
<td>34.48***</td>
<td>30.55***</td>
<td>17.97***</td>
<td>2.21</td>
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<tr>
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<td>R²</td>
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<td>.15</td>
<td>.14</td>
<td>.10</td>
<td>.12</td>
</tr>
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<td>Adjusted R²</td>
<td>.10</td>
<td>.13</td>
<td>.12</td>
<td>.08</td>
<td>.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>F</td>
<td>6.00***</td>
<td>7.57***</td>
<td>6.76***</td>
<td>4.78***</td>
<td>5.67***</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

a = 0 = male, 1 = female.
b Standardized beta coefficients.
c p < .05.
d p < .001.

Table 4
Moderated regression results for Hypotheses 3 and 4

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Step</th>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Job satisfaction</th>
<th>Intent to remain</th>
<th>Job performance</th>
<th>Job satisfaction</th>
<th>Intent to remain</th>
<th>Job performance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
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<td>1</td>
<td>Gender</td>
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<td>.02</td>
<td>−.08</td>
<td>−.10</td>
<td>.03</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Age</td>
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<td>−.01</td>
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<td>−.06</td>
<td>−.01</td>
<td>−.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Years experience</td>
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<td>.29***</td>
<td>.10</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>.29***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Tenure</td>
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<td>.10</td>
<td>.16**</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>.10</td>
<td>.16**</td>
</tr>
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<td>.01</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>.11</td>
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<td></td>
<td>F</td>
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<td>0.145</td>
<td>0.660***</td>
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<td>Role ambiguity</td>
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<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.00</td>
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<td>.18**</td>
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<tr>
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<td>POS</td>
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<td>.30***</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>.36***</td>
<td>.19**</td>
<td>.15**</td>
</tr>
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<td>.12</td>
<td>.15</td>
<td>.04</td>
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<tr>
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<td>ΔF</td>
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<td>20.06***</td>
<td>04.61**</td>
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<td>3</td>
<td>RA × POS</td>
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<td>−.33**</td>
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<tr>
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<td>RC × POS</td>
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<td>.00</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>ΔF</td>
<td>11.38***</td>
<td>04.17*</td>
<td>04.31*</td>
<td>04.61*</td>
<td>05.73*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>R²</td>
<td>.39</td>
<td>.12</td>
<td>.16</td>
<td>.15</td>
<td>.20</td>
<td>.17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Adjusted R²</td>
<td>.37</td>
<td>.09</td>
<td>.13</td>
<td>.12</td>
<td>.17</td>
<td>.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>F</td>
<td>19.36***</td>
<td>04.14***</td>
<td>05.73***</td>
<td>05.43***</td>
<td>07.47***</td>
<td>06.15***</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

a = 0 = male, 1 = female.
b Standardized beta coefficients.
c p < .05.
d p < .01.
e p < .001.
moderates the relationships between both role conflict and job satisfaction ($\Delta F = 3.81, p \leq .05, \beta = -.36, R^2 = .15$), and role ambiguity and intent to remain ($\Delta F = 4.17, p \leq .05, \beta = -.33, R^2 = .12$), it does not do so in the hypothesized direction (see Figures 1 and 2). Finally, results show a significant interaction between role conflict and POS in predicting task performance ($\Delta F = 5.73, p \leq .05, \beta = .43, R^2 = .17$), but the interaction between role ambiguity and POS was not significant ($\Delta F = .40, p \geq .05$). Thus, both Hypotheses 3 and 4 received mixed support.

**Discussion**

The results of this study indicate several interesting findings. First, there were differential results related to our role stress–work outcome variables. Namely, in our sample of boundary spanning employees, role ambiguity was not related to intent to remain and role conflict was not associated with job satisfaction. To a certain extent, this is not surprising. As described earlier, role stress is generally considered an expected part of the boundary spanner job. There is frequently conflict between satisfying the needs of the customer and meeting organizational revenue goals. Also, customer service is somewhat ambiguous, given that customer demands are seldom perfectly predictable. However, the role conflict—intent to remain and role ambiguity—job satisfaction links are strongly negative for boundary spanning employees, meaning that certain types of role stress can impact specific attitudes and intentions for these workers. Perhaps boundary spanners believe that while a certain amount of role stress is to be expected, organizations can act to reduce the amount of role conflict they experience, since the conflict is primarily between the competing needs of the customer and the organization. Therefore, if there are high levels of role conflict, salespeople may not be dissatisfied with their jobs, but may still seek employment at other firms that have made overt efforts to lower the potential role conflict levels for their sales employees.
Similarly, while boundary spanner employees may feel that organizations cannot control the ambiguity surrounding customer demands, they may not enjoy this part of the job. Thus, they may experience lower job satisfaction associated with higher levels.
of role ambiguity, without a corresponding decrease in their intent to remain with the firm. Finally, another result that is inconsistent with most research on stress and performance (e.g., Jackson & Schuler, 1985; Tubre & Collins, 2000) is that in our sample role conflict and task performance were linked positively. However, this is consistent with the findings of Van Dyne, Jehn and Cummings (2001), who also found a positive link between both home and work-related strain and the performance of hairdressers. They argued that the increased sales performance of these service workers under conditions of high strain may be due to attention-conflict theory (Baron, 1986). This theory suggests that when workers experience high levels of conflict, they focus their attention on well-refined aspects of their jobs. In our sample, this could mean that when boundary spanners experience high levels of role conflict, they focus on meeting customer needs, which would naturally result in an increase in sales.

A second area of interesting findings is related to perceived organizational support. Results indicate that POS has a direct negative association with role ambiguity and conflict. This is consistent with findings of prior studies that included both boundary spanning (e.g., Babakus et al., 1996) and non-boundary spanning employees (e.g., Hutchison, 1997). As explained through our hypothesized arguments (see Hypothesis 1), organizations that care about employee well-being are probably more likely to explicate work norms and expectations, thus directly reducing the amount of conflict and ambiguity associated with various employee roles. Similarly, the arguments for Hypothesis 2 were also supported for both job satisfaction and intent to remain with the organization. Employees who perceive high levels of POS are more likely to remain with their companies and have greater job satisfaction than workers who experience low levels of POS. While the results for the POS—intent to remain association is consistent with social exchange theory (Blau, 1964), the lack of significant correlation between POS and task performance is inconsistent with these arguments. Generally, according to social exchange tenets, employees will reciprocate (Gouldner, 1960) for support granted to them by the organization through a variety of ways, including high levels of organizational commitment and quality performance (e.g., Eisenberger et al., 1986). However, in our sample, it appears that boundary spanners do not view higher sales levels (i.e., task performance) as a response to POS. This may be due to the economic focus on their performance. Many salespeople operate on a commission basis, in which they receive pay based on achieving sales quotas. This creates a strong quid pro quo pay-performance link not accounted for by social exchange. Thus, boundary spanners may not see high task performance as a way to reciprocate for POS, which they consider to be less tangible than economic reward. They may therefore choose other ways that are more reflective of the employer–employee relationship, such as staying with the firm, high organizational commitment, loyalty, and other prosocial behavior (e.g., Puffer, 1987; Wayne et al., 2002).

In addition to direct effects, perceived organizational support appears to indirectly reduce the effects of certain types of role stress on specific work outcomes for boundary spanning employees. As hypothesized, POS attenuates the negative relations between both role ambiguity and job satisfaction as well as role conflict and intent to remain. Specifically, firms that send signals indicating they value employee contributions and care about their well-being not only reduce the amount of role stress, but also help workers cope with the expected role stress associated with job tasks. Boundary spanning employees who perceive high levels of organizational support experience less of a decrease in job satisfaction under...
highly ambiguous role conditions, and are more likely to have intentions to remain with the organization despite high amounts of role conflict, than employees with low levels of POS. Thus, in general, the negative relationship between role stress and work outcomes remains true, albeit dampened, for employees who experience high levels of POS.

However, the current study also indicates an interesting pattern of results for employees who experience low levels of perceived organizational support. While the generally accepted negative link between role stress and work outcomes holds for both role ambiguity—job satisfaction and role conflict—intent to remain (both stronger relations for low POS than high POS employees), there is actually a positive association between role ambiguity and intent to remain as well as role conflict and both job satisfaction and task performance for these employees. Thus, boundary spanners who perceive low POS are more likely to remain with the firm under highly ambiguous role conditions than workers who perceive high organizational support. Perhaps boundary spanners who are not certain about how to meet customer demands also feel less certain about finding a job at another firm, and are thus hesitant to leave their current job despite low support from their current organization. Another explanation may be that as salespeople spend more time at their jobs (our sample averaged 11.5 years of selling experience and 5 years tenure with their current employer) they may simply grow to accept the high levels of role stress inherent in their tasks and actually prefer to be left alone to do their jobs away from the firm and what he or she may perceive to be its interfering or intrusions. Also, workers who have low POS actually experience greater job satisfaction and higher task performance levels as their role conflict increases.

As described above, these results are consistent with attention-conflict theory (Baron, 1986), which suggests that boundary spanners will focus on what they do best in times of conflict. Salespeople would thus focus on meeting customer needs, resulting in increased levels of performance (and even achieve higher task performance than employees with high POS). Similarly, boundary spanners who perceive low organizational support may focus on positive feedback from customers who have had their needs fulfilled. This may lead to increased levels of job satisfaction, despite the low support and high conflict. Essentially, boundary spanners could be transferring their source of support from the organization to customers during role conflict. However, since the current study is cross-sectional and cannot test for causality, future research is needed to confirm these arguments.

Finally, one more interesting finding must be addressed. Past research indicates a fairly consistent, significantly positive correlation (r = .30–.40) between role conflict and role ambiguity. However, these two concepts are not empirically redundant, and they differentially predict various outcomes (e.g., performance, Jackson & Schuler, 1985; Tubre & Collins, 2000). Contrary to past research, in the current study role conflict and role ambiguity are not significantly correlated (r = .09, ns). This lack of relationship may be due to two factors: either salespeople view these two role stressors as conceptually distinct and unrelated, or methodological processes have failed to detect the true relationship. In the current sample, the use of reduced-item scales in accordance with the CFA findings (see the measures and data analyses sections) was partially responsible for the low correlation between role conflict and ambiguity. Specifically, the correlation decreased from .15 (p < .05) with all scale items included to .09 (ns) for the reduced-item scales. However, a correlation of .15 is still significantly lower than that found in prior research. Therefore, the salespeople
in our sample differentiate between role conflict and role ambiguity to a greater extent than other types of employees. Since we do not have data allowing us to determine how employees develop their perceptions about conflict and ambiguity, future research should be conducted to fully understand the relationship and distinctions between these two role stressors.

Implications

The results of this study generally suggest that managers of boundary spanning employees should seek to increase the level of support given to these workers by the organization. By implementing policies and work processes that send signals to employees that the organization cares about the employee’s well-being and values his or her contributions, the firm will both reduce the amount of role stress experienced by the employee as well as reduce any negative effects from the role stress that cannot be eliminated (i.e., the ambiguity surrounding customer demands). For example, programs and processes such as realistic job previews, flexible scheduling, participatory decision making, and employee award programs may work to benefit the organization by reducing the impact of job-related stress on employees’ likelihood of developing poor work attitudes and voluntarily leaving their jobs. In addition, informal support such as encouraging employees and acknowledging their hard work may also act to send the message that the firm supports them in their tasks. As a result, boundary spanners may be better able to handle the uncertainty and conflicts inherent in their positions.

Limitations

As with any research, this study has several limitations that should be noted. First, the data used to test the hypotheses is cross-sectional in nature so that causal inferences are not appropriate; rather we can only discuss the associations between the variables of interest. Another potential limitation concerns the generalizability of the results. While salespeople present an excellent opportunity to study role stress associated with boundary spanning activities, the majority of employees within any given organization may not hold boundary spanning positions. The results obtained in this study may or may not reflect the experiences of employees who remain internal to the organization. Future research should continue to examine and compare the prevalence of role stress in all types of employees in order to appropriately recommend ways to reduce the effects of conflict and ambiguity.

There may also be criticism associated with single source, self-report data in our study (i.e., all constructs used self-report measures). Despite the widespread use of self-report measures to examine stress and its effects, Kahn and Byosiere (1992) call for increased use of objective measures of stressors and responses to determine the validity of the subjective, self-report assessments. They do acknowledge, though, that perceptual measures of stress are valuable and give cognitive insight into how individuals experience stress. In addition, Churchill et al. (1985) empirically illustrated that the self-report measure of task performance does not potentially inflate ratings. Similarly, Boroom and Ramsey (1995) found that this same measure of self-reported task performance was highly correlated with managerial ratings $(r = .65)$. However, future research efforts should attempt to vary the sources of
data and gather more objective information regarding task performance in order to maintain consistency with commonly accepted research practices.

Future Research and Conclusion

Despite some limitations, this research contributes to the stress literature by demonstrating the importance of perceived organizational support to boundary spanning employees. These results suggest that organizations should attempt to actively manage their employees’ perceptions of support in order to reap positive outcomes for organizational functioning. Therefore, additional research is needed to determine the ways in which organizations may develop positive perceptions of support for their boundary spanning employees. Future researchers may wish to examine company policies and processes such as High Involvement Work Processes (Vandenberg, Richardson & Eastman, 1999), flexible scheduling, and ESOPs, to assess their influence on employees’ perceptions of support. Knowing the signals that various programs and processes send to employees can help managers increase the probability that employees perceive themselves as contributing valuable work to their work organization, thus possibly reducing the effects of role stress.

Another area for future study is to compare the strength of the buffering effect of various sources of support. Continuing research that helps distinguish the impact of coworker, supervisor, organization, and family support on role stress would be useful for supervisors in their efforts to help employees manage both stress and their responses to stress. For example, if managers knew that there was stronger buffering effect from more proximal sources of support (i.e., supervisors and coworkers) than for distal sources (i.e., the organization), they can concentrate their training programs and monetary investments on such practices as mentoring and team-building. Also, Brief et al. (1988) and Burke et al. (1993) both suggest that the negative affectivity may account for much of the reported association between job stress and work attitudes. Therefore, future researchers examining both boundary and non-boundary spanning employees may wish to consider and further examine the impact of personality differences in relation to sources of support and other predictors of role stress.

A final possible area of future research is the examination of the theoretical reasoning behind the differential results found in the current study. In our study, we found two patterns of results: one that could be explained through a support hypothesis (i.e., the buffering effects of POS on both the role conflict—intent to remain and role ambiguity—job satisfaction relations), and the second as explained through attention-conflict theory (i.e., the inverted slope effects of POS on the role ambiguity—intent to remain relation and the associations between role conflict and both job satisfaction and task performance). Our results suggest that past inconsistencies regarding the effects of support on the stressor-outcome relationship may be explained through the situational appropriateness of either the buffer hypothesis or attention-conflict theory. Thus, future research efforts should examine possible reasons for why and when one or both of these possible effects may exist.

As noted by Jackson and Schuler (1985), there is a lack of explanatory power in studies solely considering direct relations between employee role stress and work outcomes. Accordingly, subsequent research into the nature of these variables has increasingly considered the role of potential moderating variables. This study extends our understanding
of the relations among role stressors and outcomes by both exploring a different source of support and expanding the analysis into a distinct and highly important group of employees. The general hypothesis underlying this research is supported, as it appears that perceptions of organizational support offer a powerful way to both directly and indirectly combat the negative effects of certain types of role stressors upon boundary spanner work outcomes.

Acknowledgments

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References


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