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THE IMPACT OF PERCEIVED ORGANIZATIONAL SUPPORT ON SALESPERSON PSYCHOLOGICAL AND BEHAVIORAL WORK OUTCOMES

Robert J Riggle^{1*}, Paul Solomon² and Andrew Artis²

*Corresponding Author: **Robert J Riggle** ✉ bob.riggle@citadel.edu

The purpose of this study is to investigate the impact of Perceived Organizational Support (POS) on salesperson psychological and behavioral outcomes. Three hundred survey invitations were sent via email to salespeople at three sales-focused organizations. In total, 251 responses were gathered yielding an overall response rate for the study of 83.6%. The results from the analysis confirm perceived organizational support does impact salesperson psychological and behavioral outcomes.

Keywords: Perceived Organizational Support, Salespeople, Trust, Workplace Isolation, Job Satisfaction, Organizational Commitment, Structural Equation Modeling

INTRODUCTION

As many of today's businesses continue to struggle to survive or remain profitable, there is growing importance for managers to better understand the factors that influence important employee-oriented work outcomes. The growing significance being placed on understanding employees and their behavior within the organization has produced a great deal of interest in investigating employee perceptions of support within the organization.

Salespeople are a vital part of our work environment. They are responsible for creating the revenues needed for firms to remain profitable

and survive. In many instances, salespeople are also the face of the organization to the customer. An article by Artis and Harris (2007) highlights the importance of salespeople within the business landscape. Artis and Harris noted that sales related occupations comprise approximately 10.5% (or approximately 15.25 million) of all jobs held in the United States. To date, little research has been conducted on organizational climate and its impact on salespeople's psychological and behavioral outcomes. Salespeople are considered boundary spanners or front line employees in that they typically spend more time in the field dealing with customers. This geographic and psychological separation from the

¹ The Citadel, The Military College of South Carolina, 171 Moultrie Street, Bond Hall – School of Business, Charleston, South Carolina 29409.

² University of South Florida, College of Business Administration, Department of Marketing, 4202 East Fowler Avenue, Tampa, Florida 33620

organization can create a much different work environment for salespeople as compared to non-boundary personnel (Riggle *et al.*, 2009).

The purpose of this study is to build and test a model that integrates the marketing, management, and psychological literatures with respect to organizational support and its impact on sales person psychological and behavioral outcomes. The research proposed in this study will take a critical first step in helping to shed light on how social exchange relationships (i.e., professional and personal relationships between individuals within the organization) and the perception of organizational support influences salesperson attitudes and behaviors. Moreover, this research provides empirical evidence that a supportive organization drives salesperson outcomes such as trust in the organization, commitment to the organization, and overall job satisfaction.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND HYPOTHESIS DEVELOPMENT

Perceived Organizational Support

The POS construct was developed in 1986 by Robert Eisenberger and colleagues to explain how employees view their employing organization's commitment to them and how those support mechanisms gained from the organization's commitment to the employee influences employee commitment back to the organization. The theoretical basis used for conceptualizing this construct was Social Exchange Theory (SET). The notions of economic social exchanges (Blau, 1964) and the norm of reciprocity (Gouldner, 1960) have both been used by organizational researchers to describe the motivational basis behind employee behaviors and the formation of

positive employee attitudes (e.g., Etzioni, 1961; Levinson, 1965; March and Simon, 1958). SET has been and is one of the most influential conceptual paradigms in organizational behavior research to date (Cropanzano and Mitchell, 2005).

Social Exchange Theory has been classified under the 'motivational theory' category due to its ability to explain interpersonal behaviors. According to Jex (2002), motivational theories are concerned with the question of why people do what they do. Three primary reasons exist regarding the need to study motivation of individuals. First, motivation is the key to understanding many types of behavior within organizations. Being able to understand these behaviors may help researchers, in turn, to understand other important behaviors such as job performance and turnover. Second, understanding these workplace behaviors may increase the ability to predict future behaviors. For instance, say an organization's sales managers know the motivation underlying a particular performance domain for their salespeople. By understanding these motivation factors, the sales manager can more accurately predict future performance outcomes which can be very important for selection, training, or advancement. Third, understanding the motives behind certain behavior can enable managers to harness and/or influence it.

According to the organizational support paradigm (Eisenberger *et al.*, 1986), the development of POS is encouraged by employees' propensity to assign the organization human like qualities. Employees global beliefs are developed as a result of the organization providing support mechanisms that include but are not limited to providing a fair organizational culture,

increasing monetary and non-monetary compensation such as verbal praise and training, and increased decision making power or autonomy. In addition, research has indicated that organizational rewards and favorable job conditions contribute more to the development of POS, if the employee believes that these rewards and outcomes are because the organization wants to provide them rather than having to provide them contractually or legally (Eisenberger *et al.*, 1997; Eisenberger *et al.*, 1986; Shore *et al.*, 1995). As employees develop POS, research has indicated that they begin to reciprocate back to the organization (Eisenberger *et al.*, 1997). During this process, many favorable outcomes may occur that include but are not limited to increased job satisfaction and heightened affect, increased organizational commitment, increased task and contextual performance, and reduced turnover intentions.

The notion of POS originated in the psychology literature and has seen prolific investigation within both the psychology and organizational management disciplines. From its inception, POS has been used to investigate how employees view their organization's commitment back to them through the provision of support mechanisms such as resources and pay (Riggle *et al.*, 2007). Within the psychology literature, much research has investigated the different commitment mechanisms stemming from employee POS. Constructs that have seen abundant research are overall organizational commitment as well as affective, normative, and continuance commitment. This is somewhat logical in that the main assumption regarding POS refers to commitment from the organization for commitment back to the organization. Additionally, other variables such as job

satisfaction, organizational citizenship behavior, and role stress have also been studied with POS in the psychology literature. Similarly, the management and organizational behavior literature has somewhat mirrored the psychology literature in its research on POS. Quite a bit of literature in this field has also concentrated on organizational commitment issues as well as important outcomes such as job satisfaction and role stress.

Workplace Isolation

The concept of workplace isolation comes from the psychology discipline which describes isolation in terms of the absence of support from coworkers and supervisors in their organization (Marshall *et al.*, 2007). Bowlby (1973) characterized isolation as an alarming phenomenon because humans inherently seek other humans for comfort and support. Native Tribes use group membership as a means for socializing and survival while incorporating membership isolation for members who do not conform to tribal norms (Jex, 2002). Employees of modern organizations view the group as a source of acceptance and perceive isolation (physical or social) as stressful (House, 1981) because acceptance provides examples of acceptable behavior, reduces stress, and allows employees to reach goals and objectives nearly impossible to do so individually (Marshall *et al.*, 2007). Moreover, Moon and Gupta (1997) suggested that team membership provides greater opportunities to convert prospects into sales through access to assistance from the team. In today's fast paced sales organization, it would be easy for a salesperson to become so involved with building client relationships that they do not have the time to interact with other members of their organization which could create

a perception of isolation. It would stand to reason that if an organization was perceived to value an employee's contributions as well as care about their well-being, then feelings of isolation would be reduced, thus reducing workplace stress and increasing the feeling of acceptance in the firm. Therefore, the following hypothesis is suggested:

Hypothesis 1: POS will have a negative impact on an employees' perception of isolation.

Trust in the Organization

Trust in the organization has also been suggested to be related to POS and refers to the willingness of both the employee and organization to be open (vulnerable) to the actions of one another irrespective of being able to monitor or control the other party's actions (Mayer *et al.*, 1995; Riggle *et al.*, 2005). This vulnerability comes from the uncertainty regarding the other party's intentions to honor the agreement and act appropriately. Blau (1964) noted that the establishment of relational exchanges between the organization and employee involves making resource investments in the other party which connotes a commitment by that party to fulfill some agreement such as a job contract. In order to equalize the balance of exchange, salespeople will feel obligated to reciprocate the good deeds or resources obtained from the organization by increasing their performance and overall commitment to reaching the organization's goals and objectives. The reciprocation aspect of POS and social exchange may reinforce and stabilize trust which, in turn can increase important behavioral outcomes. The notion of trust has been conceptualized as the extent to which a salesperson has confidence in the organization's reliability and integrity. This definition is based on the conceptualization of trust found in the

relationship marketing literature, which stresses the importance of trust between organizations (e.g., Moorman *et al.*, 1992; Morgan and Hunt, 1994).

There have been various conceptualizations of trust in the literature (Brashear *et al.*, 2003) (Brashear *et al.*, 2003). Podsakoff *et al.* (1990) noted the lack of a "clear consensus" as to the most appropriate conceptualization or measurement. Previous one-dimensional conceptualizations include trust as reliability (Garbarino and Johnson, 1999), competence (Cook and Wall, 1980), benevolence (Anderson and Weitz, 1989), and integrity or honesty (Jap, 1999). Other multi-dimensional approaches include trust as behaviors (Smith and Barclay, 1997) as well as conceptualization using benevolence and credibility (Ganesan, 1994). Within the sales literature, several researchers have used the marketing and management approaches that define trust as the degree of confidence that the salesperson has in their manager being both benevolent and honest. In this conceptualization, trust is like a buyer-seller relationship whereby exchanges are made by each party (sales manager gives direction, advice, praise, and resources in exchange for effort, performance, and commitment) (Rich, 1997). Within the sales manager-salesperson relational dyad, trust may act as a countervailing force that helps to create positive feelings toward the organization as well as positive feelings toward the job for the employee. Flaherty and Pappas (2000) identified that as salespeople trust their organization, they also feel more satisfied, feel safer in their job which promotes commitment, and can indulge in proactive workplace behaviors.

Hypothesis 2: POS will have a strong positive impact on employees' trust in the organization.

JOB SATISFACTION

Job satisfaction is characterized as the employees' overall affective attitude or feelings toward their job. The more positive feelings the employee has about the job, the greater their job satisfaction (Witt, 1991). Eisenberger *et al.* (1986) suggest the more an organization is perceived to be attempting to provide support for the employee, the greater their job satisfaction.

Hypothesis 3: POS will have a positive impact on employees' satisfaction in their job.

ORGANIZATIONAL COMMITMENT

Organizational Commitment is defined as the magnitude of the employee's identification and involvement with an organization (Mowday *et al.*, 1982; Porter *et al.*, 1974). Porter *et al.* (1974) offered an affective-based interpretation of employee's organizational commitment that suggests an employee commits to the organization because the employee identifies with it and intends to stay involved with the firm. Meyer and Allen (1984, 1987) expanded the organizational commitment domain by characterizing commitment as affective, continuance, and normative. In attempts to bring clarity to the composition of employee organizational commitment, Meyer and Allen (1984) suggest that affective commitment is an employee's intent to remain with the firm because they want to; whereas, continuance commitment was when an employee remained because they had to. They suggest that normative commitment occurs when the employee feels obligated to the firm and thus intends to remain. Based on the empirical evidence in the literature, POS is posited as being directly related with organizational commitment.

Hypothesis 4: POS will have a positive impact on employees' intention to be committed to the organization.

The hypothesized model and the corresponding hypotheses can be viewed in Figure 1.

METHODOLOGY

The research methodology described in this study follows the Churchill and Iacobucci research design approach (Churchill and Iacobucci, 2004). The Churchill and Iacobucci paradigm is an updated version of Churchill's (1976) prescription for research in the social sciences. This paradigm has been widely used within business and organizational research and has served as the "gold standard" for research in marketing. This section is outlined in the following manner. First, a description of the research commences with the benefits of using a cross-sectional analysis, followed by identifying the type of data collection technique and instrument to be used. Second, the potential sample characteristics are discussed along with a description of the pretest. Third, an overview of the chosen data collection technique is presented along with guidelines for data processing and analysis.

The sample used in this study consists of inside business-to-business salespeople across the US in multiple industries and firms. The sample is drawn from three companies that were willing to participate in return for reports and presentations regarding the findings of the study. Respondents received the following items, a letter from the researcher via email, an email letter from their sales manager describing the survey and asking for their help, and a hyperlink to an online questionnaire. The letter from the researcher

explained the study, ensured confidentiality, and asked for the respondent's help in completing the survey. Two weeks after the initial mailing, a follow-up e-mail was sent to remind the respondents to complete and submit the questionnaire.

Sample demographics of the 251 responses (58.2% male and 40.2% female), the age response most frequently reported was 18-25 (104 responses) followed by 26-35 (92 responses). The respondents are well educated with nearly 150 reporting they held a degree from a four-year college or university. The overwhelming majority (64.5%) of the respondents are single and report a yearly income range of \$50,000 to \$59,000.

All survey items were taken from extant literature. Appendix A lists each of the constructs and their respective items.

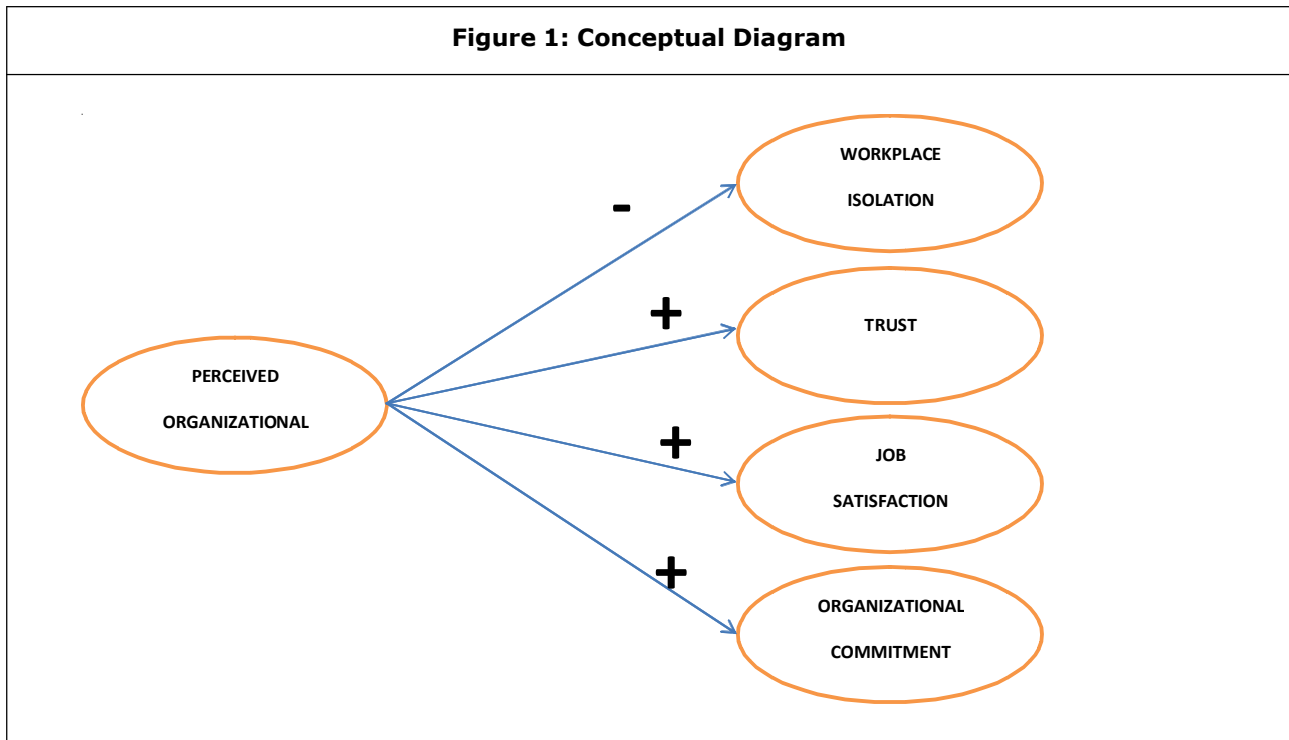
RESULTS

A Structural Equation Model (SEM) estimated in LISREL is the appropriate statistical technique for this analysis. SEM allows the researcher to analyze multiple dependence relationships at one time as shown in Figure 1. The analysis followed the stages suggested by Hair *et al.* (1998). First, we conducted a path diagram linking the relationships between both endogenous and exogenous variables (Hair *et al.*, 1998). Next, we specified the measurement model to account for the reliability of the measures. Thirdly, we input the correlation matrix that was previously calculated so the model can be identified. Once identified, the model was assessed for path estimates and goodness of fit. Rules of thumb for Goodness of fit suggest that estimates such as Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA), Comparative Fit Index (CFI), and

Normed Fit Index (NFI) are typically used for assessing the model fit. Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA) (Steiger and Lind, 1980) is a measure of the discrepancy per degree of freedom for the model. Normed Fit Index (NFI) (Bentler and Bonett, 1980) is an incremental fit statistic that is defined in terms of the minimal values of the respective fit function (Gerbing and Anderson, 1992). NFI essentially standardizes the chi-square statistic where zero is "no fit" and one is "perfect fit". It is primarily used to compare a restricted model to a full model. Similarly, the CFI measures the improvement in non-centrality. Decision criteria for these statistics yield that a model is a close fit if RMSEA is 0.08 or below, CFI is 0.90 or above, and NFI is 0.90 or above (Byrne, 1998). If the model is deemed to be well fit, interpretation can begin.

Three hundred survey invitations were sent via e-mail to salespeople at three organizations. The participating organizations included a privately owned publishing firm (Organization 1) located in the southeast United States, a large privately owned Internet recruiting firm (Organization 2) located in the upper Midwest, and a publicly traded worldwide financial information reporting firm (Organization 3). The first wave of data collection yielded 187 individual responses. The second wave of invitations was emailed to only those in the sample who had not already responded and yielded an additional 49 responses. The third and final wave occurred four weeks after the initial wave and yielded the final 15 responses. In total, 251 responses were gathered yielding an overall response rate for the study of 83.6%.

Fit statistics for the model indicated an acceptable level of fit (see, Hu and Bentler, 1999) with the data: Chi-Square = 533.28, RMSEA = .074, CFI = .97, IFI = .97. The standardized path

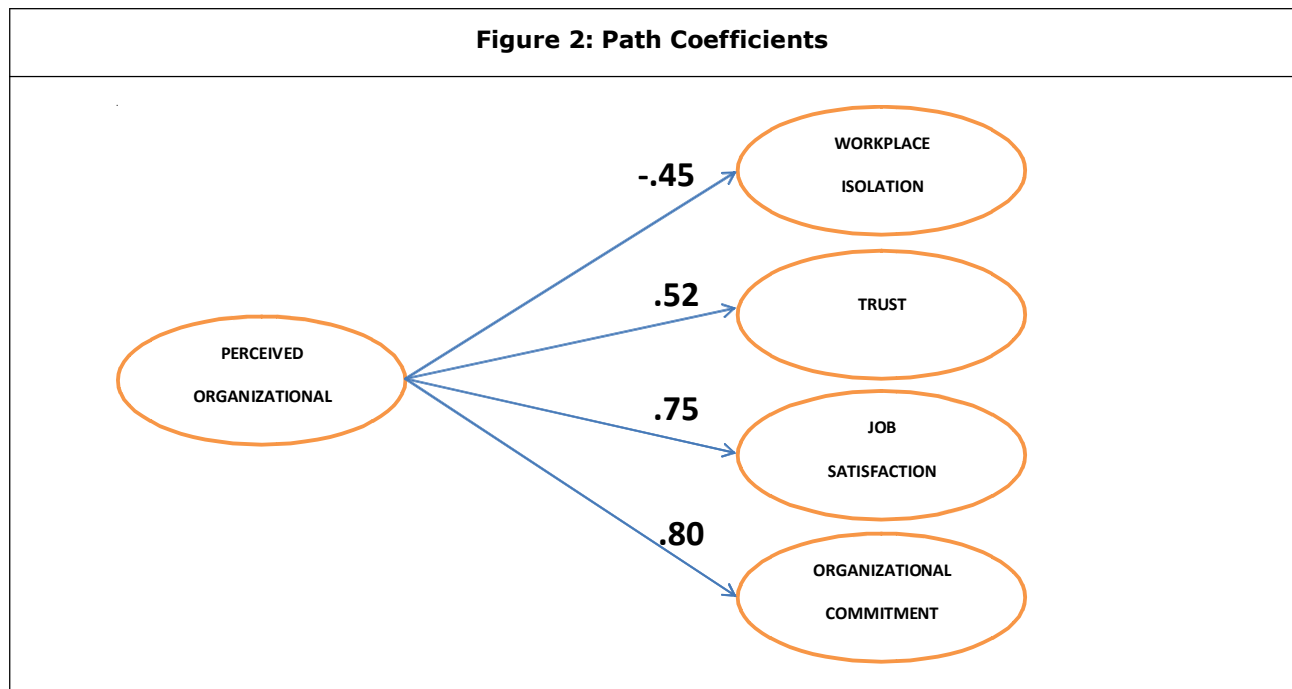


coefficients can be seen in Figure 2. With respect to the outcome variables in the model (Workplace Isolation, Trust, Job Satisfaction, and Organizational Commitment), each of the standardized path coefficients were shown to support all hypotheses previously set forth. In support of *H1*, POS has a significant negative impact on Workplace Isolation (SDE = $-.45$, $t = -5.54$) thereby reducing employee perceptions of isolation in the workplace. The analysis also revealed that POS is a positive antecedent of Trust in the Organization in support of *H2* (SDE = $.52$, $t = 7.89$).

We also hypothesized that POS would increase employees' perceptions of job satisfaction (*H3*) as well as establish a more committed employee to the organization (*H4*). Both of these hypotheses were supported by the structural analysis (SDE = $.75/.80$, $t = 12.84/13.04$, respectively).

DISCUSSION AND MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS

Sales managers may want to consider these findings when attempting to combat the effects of role stress on psychological and behavioral outcomes. Increasing salesperson perceptions of support from both the organization and its agents may help to reduce those stressors. Some ways that may help increase notions of support could be to communicate to those salespeople that the organization cares about their well-being and values their contributions back to the organization. Communicating that the organization values the salesperson's contributions may come in the form of recognition for sales volume or participation in activities toward the goals and objectives of the organization. Furthermore, organizations may find it fruitful to institute policies and programs to



show its appreciation to the salespeople. Ideas such as flexible scheduling, cross-training, sincere “thank-yous”, and special events may go a long way to providing the feeling of support to the salesperson from the organization.

Perceived organizational support was also hypothesized to positively impact the amount of trust the salesperson has in the organization in reference to research question two. According to the analysis, POS does indeed positively drive a salesperson’s trust in the organization. The only previous evidence of a relationship between POS and trust can be seen in a 2002 meta analysis by Rhoades and Eisenberger and from Riggle *et al.* (2009). The most recent evidence suggests that the correlation between POS and trust is .68, which indicates there is a strong relationship between the variables and borders on conceptual redundancy. The results from the structural model presented in earlier indicate that POS actually drives trust, demonstrating a highly significant path coefficient of .49 ($t = 5.82$).

Several implications for practice can be drawn from this finding. First, Flaherty and Pappas (2000), suggested that trust plays a big role in salesperson psychological and behavioral outcomes. Their study revealed that salespeople who trust their managers and organization are more satisfied in their job and are more committed to the organization. While this study did not find the same results, sales managers should consider these implications when dealing with their subordinates. Things sales managers may want to try to increase trust would be to provide clear evidence that they care about the salesperson’s well-being by creating an environment of open communication and sincere feedback about their appreciation of the job done. With respect to Job Satisfaction and Organizational Commitment, POS was shown to increase employees’ perception of both thus indicating that POS is indeed an important factor.

One of the more interesting factors identified in this research is that a large portion of the

sample consisted of individuals from the “Millennial” Generation. Popular press outlets have discussed how Millennials are different than other generations within the workplace. Some go as far as to suggest that Millennials are lazy and entitled while others posit that they are unmanageable. While these notions are will discussed, it seems as though the main difference between Millennials and everyone else is that Millennials have a different work-life balance. These are people that have grown up on technology. They are constantly connected and seek teams/groups for socialization, look for outward praise for their contributions, and are overly connected to their parents (Klass and Lindenburger, 2014). Firms managing Millennials would do well to adopt the POS concept in managing Millennial employees due to their need for praise and socialization. The perception of support (i.e., appreciation for their contributions and care for their well-being) would go far in helping to efficiently transition this young generation to the workforce.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

A few limitations exist with this study. First, the sample used in this study consisted of inside business-to-business salespeople across three firms in three different industries. Even though the sample covers a somewhat broad range, the generalizability of the study results could be questioned. Moreover, all respondents in the sample were inside business-to-business salespeople which could create questions as to the generalizability. At best, the results from the study could apply to inside salespeople focusing on business-to-business accounts. Another limitation of the study is its cross-sectional design.

While the results strongly supported the hypothesized model, there could be alternative explanations for these results which were not measured in the study. A longitudinal research design might shed light on these potential problems.

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APPENDIX A

Survey Items*	
CONSTRUCT	ITEM
POS	The organization values my contribution to its well being.
	The organization fails to appreciate any extra effort from me. (R)
	The organization would ignore any complaint from me. (R)
	The organization really cares about my well being.
	Even if I did the best job possible, the organization would fail to notice. (R)
	The organization cares about my general satisfaction at work.
	The organization shows very little concern for me. (R)
	The organization takes pride in my accomplishments at work.
TRUST	I believe my organization has high integrity.
	I can expect my organization to treat me in a consistent and predictable fashion.
	My organization is not always honest and truthful. (R)
	In general, I believe my organization’s motives and intentions are good.
	I don’t think my organization treats me fairly. (R)
	My organization is open and upfront with me.
	I’m not sure I fully trust my employer. (R)
WORKPLACE ISOLATION	I am well integrated with the department/company where I work.
	I am kept in the loop regarding company social events/functions.
	I am part of the company network.
	Upper management knows about my achievements.
	My supervisor communicates my achievements to upper management.
	I have friends available to me at work.
	I have one or more coworkers available who I talk to about day-to-day problems at work.

APPENDIX A (CONT.)

Survey Items*	
CONSTRUCT	ITEM
	I have coworkers available whom I can depend on when I have a problem.
	I have enough people available at work with whom I can talk about my job.
	I have people around me at work.
JOB SATISFACTION	In general, I don't like my job. (R)
	All in all, I am satisfied with my job.
	In general, I like working here.
ORGANIZATIONAL COMMITMENT	I am proud to tell others that I am part of this organization.
	I talk up this organization to my friends as a great organization to work for.
	I feel a sense of "ownership" for this organization rather than just being an employee.
Note: *All items were set on a seven-point, Likert-type scale from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 7 (Strongly Agree).	



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Hyderabad, INDIA. Ph: +91-09441351700, 09059645577

E-mail: editorijmrbs@gmail.com or editor@ijmrbs.com

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