

# The Impact of Salesperson Socialization on Organizational Commitment, Satisfaction, and Performance in a Professional Service Organization

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## INTRODUCTION

Services, as has been frequently discussed, are difficult for customers to evaluate because of their intangible nature. Most services are extremely interactive in nature. In many service organizations, especially professional services, the interaction with the customer-contact person is the only aspect of the firm visible to the customer (Bateson 1989, p. 293). Consequently, this encounter *is* the service in the eyes of the customer (Czepiel, Solomon, and Surprenant 1985). The customer-contact person in these organizations can thus play a, if not *the*, pivotal role in the success of the organization.

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The customer-contact person in many service organizations is often also a salesperson. For example, in a restaurant, the waitress not only delivers food and beverages, but also acts as a salesperson in suggesting a particular dinner selection or convincing the customer to purchase dessert. Likewise, in professional services such as the insurance industry, the insurance agent is often the only person in the organization with whom a customer may interact. All questions, paperwork, claims, and sales are funneled through this one sales agent.

Several authors have argued that the satisfaction of the service employee or salesperson is an essential prerequisite for customer satisfaction (cf. Albrecht 1990; Berry and Parasuraman 1991; Heskett 1987). Further, the process of socializing the services salesperson has been identified as important in establishing this foundation (Kelley 1992). Equally important, the socialization process has also been related to salesperson performance and commitment to the job and organization (Dubinsky, Howell, Ingram, and Bellenger 1986). Clearly, the ability to effectively integrate the salesperson into the organization must be of interest to management, since salesperson commitment, satisfaction, and performance will directly impact the performance of the organization.

Socialization in the context of this article refers to the process by which the behavior patterns, customs, beliefs, and practices of a particular group are instilled in an individual. Several have argued that the process of socialization is an inherent and critical part of becoming an active member in any organization (Churchill, Ford, and Walker 1985; Dubinsky et al. 1986; Feldman 1976a). It has also been suggested that various methods of sales force socialization, properly implemented, can significantly affect how sales recruits perform in the field (Atkinson et al. 1980; Hanan 1975; Ward 1983; Zemke and Gunkler 1985).

In spite of the relative importance of the salesperson to the overall success of the professional service organization, relatively few studies have been conducted that focus on the socialization process in such organizations. This study has two major objectives. The first objective is to assess the role (relationship) sales force socialization plays in the salesperson's perception of certain outcomes in a professional service organization, including job satisfaction, organiza-

tional commitment, and performance. The second objective is to assess the differences between sales manager and salesperson perceptions of the socialization experiences in a professional services organization and how these gaps moderate the socialization process to further impact satisfaction, organizational commitment, and performance.

### CONSTRUCT DEVELOPMENT

Several constructs have been identified as key factors in sales force socialization. The constructs examined in this study include realism, initiation-to-task, congruence, role clarity, and role conflict. These socialization factors are expected to have a significant influence on the salesperson's perception of job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and performance. Each of these constructs is described below.

*Realism* is the degree to which a new salesperson's perception of life with the organization accurately reflects reality (Dubinsky et al. 1986). Sales recruits who are provided with a socialization program that provides a realistic picture of the job typically have stronger commitments to the organization (Dean and Wanous 1984; Reilly, Brown, Blood, and Malatesta 1981). Realism has also been linked to job satisfaction (Michaels and Spector 1982).

*Initiation-to-task* refers to the degree to which supervisors define the roles of subordinates in job-related activities, specify procedures, and assign tasks (Gibson, Ivancevich, and Donnelly 1973). Dubinsky et al. (1986) contend that initiation-to-task reflects the degree to which recruits feel competent and accepted as colleagues. Initiation-to-task has been hypothesized to have a positive influence on job satisfaction (Churchill, Ford, and Walker 1976; Teas 1983).

*Congruence* is the degree to which the salesperson's needs and skills are compatible with the actual work environment (Holland 1973). Feldman (1976a) describes congruence as the "fit" between individuals and their work. Congruence has been suggested to have a direct relationship on job satisfaction (Feldman 1976b), organizational commitment (Sager and Johnston 1989), and performance (Walker, Churchill, and Ford 1975).

*Role clarity* is the extent to which a salesperson is confident

about others' (i.e., sales managers, colleagues, customers) expectations with respect to the job and the best ways to fulfill these expectations (Behrman and Perreault 1984; Kahn et al. 1964). Researchers have found role clarity to have a positive impact on job satisfaction (Behrman, Bigoness, and Perreault 1981; Jackson and Schuler 1985), organizational commitment (Johnston, Parasuraman, Futrell, and Black 1990; King and King 1990), and performance (Behrman, Bigoness, and Perreault 1981; Brief and Aldag 1976).

*Role conflict* is the amount of incongruity or incompatibility of expectations associated with the role (Kahn et al. 1964; Miles and Perreault 1976). One way role conflict occurs is when the salesperson has incompatible demands placed on him or her by different role partners (i.e., sales managers, colleagues, customers) (Ford, Walker, and Churchill 1976). Role conflict has been found to be inversely related to job satisfaction (Behrman and Perreault 1984; Frone 1990; Tanner and Castleberry 1990), organizational commitment (Fisher and Gitelson 1983; Van Sell, Brief, and Schuler 1981), and performance (Behrman and Perreault 1984; King and King 1990).

As indicated above, the socialization factors are hypothesized to impact certain outcomes. *Job satisfaction*, one of these outcomes, is the perception that one's job fulfills or allows for the fulfillment of important job values (Locke 1970). Satisfaction has been hypothesized to lead to organizational commitment (Johnston et al. 1990; Sager and Johnston 1989).

*Organizational commitment*, another expected outcome of the socialization process, is an internal feeling, belief, or set of intentions that enhances an employee's desire to remain with an organization (Hunt, Chonko, and Wook 1985). Commitment has also been described as the relative strength of an individual's identification with and involvement in a particular organization (Porter, Crampon, and Smith 1976). Chonko (1986) contends commitment to both the organization and the job leads to improved effectiveness, and is therefore worth developing in employees. Ingram, Lee, and Skinner (1989) contend that socialization programs can lead to increased organizational commitment.

*Performance*, the final outcome investigated in this study, is the

completion of agreed upon job tasks with precision and accuracy. Typical measures of salesperson performance include both results (such as dollar or unit sales) and activities (such as number of sales calls made or number of potential clients contacted) (Jackson, Keith, and Schlacter 1983). Performance has been found to be positively related to job satisfaction (Yammarino and Dubinsky 1990).

## METHODOLOGY

*Operationalization.* The socialization and outcome constructs described above were operationalized using measurement items from previously validated scales of each construct, modified and pretested for the present sample. A detailed description of the operationalization process is available from the authors.

*Data collection.* The data used in this study were collected from a large insurance company. The salespeople (agents), while technically independent business people, sell exclusively the products of this insurance firm. Further, the firm is quite active in its attempts to "socialize" these individuals, and agency managers have direct responsibility for their activities.

A questionnaire was given to all sales managers in one region of the organization, along with instructions to distribute the questionnaires to each of the salespersons reporting to them. All sales representatives who had been with the firm for at least one year, but for no more than 5 years, were to receive the survey. One year seemed to be a sufficient amount of time for a salesperson to complete the socialization experience; five years was chosen as an upper limit so that the socialization process would be somewhat recent. Respondents were assured that their responses would be kept anonymous, and the questionnaires were returned directly to the researchers by mail. Of the 36 questionnaires distributed to sales managers, 27 were returned (for a 75% response rate). These sales managers distributed 116 questionnaires to salespersons, and 81 were returned (70% response rate). Given these fairly good response rates, nonresponse bias was not considered to be a concern.

*Data analysis.* The first step in the overall analysis consisted of an evaluation of the items measuring each construct. Next, factor

analysis was performed to assess how well the operationalizations of each construct captured the underlying dimension of each set. Each group of variables was analyzed by using a varimax rotation with a factor loading of 0.50 or better. The constructs were all found to have between one and four factors, with all but two factors (one for realism and one for satisfaction) having coefficient alpha of greater than 0.73. Table 1 lists the alpha value and a brief description of factors associated with each construct.

### RESULTS

One objective of this study was to assess the role sales force socialization plays in the salesperson's perception of certain outcomes in a professional service setting. Table 2 presents the correlation coefficients for the socialization experience and outcome constructs. Four of the five socialization constructs significantly correlate with at least one outcome variable. Realism (REAL) has a significant ( $p < .01$ ) positive relationship with all three outcome variables (job satisfaction (SAT), performance (PERF), and organizational commitment (COM)). Congruence (CON) has a significant positive relationship with job satisfaction ( $p < .01$ ), while its relationship with the other two outcome variables is not statistically significant. Initiation-to-task (IT) has a significant positive relationship with job satisfaction ( $p < .01$ ), performance ( $p < .05$ ), and organizational commitment ( $p < .01$ ). Similarly, role clarity (RCL) also has a significant positive relationship ( $p < .05$ ) to all three outcomes. Role conflict (RCN), however, was not found to have a direct statistically significant relationship with any of the outcome variables. In summary, realism, initiation-to-task, and role clarity each are positively correlated with all three outcome variables, congruence is positively correlated with job satisfaction, and role conflict does not appear to be directly related to any of the outcome variables.

As mentioned earlier, the second objective in this study was to investigate the differences between sales manager and salesperson perceptions of the socialization experience. The means of sales managers and salespersons for item scores on each of the socialization factors and outcome variables are reported in Table 3. The sales

TABLE 1. Indicator Variables (Factors): Coefficient Alpha, and Description

Indicator Variable*	Alpha	Description
REAL	.4689 (2 items)	Job described accurately, prior to accepting the position, by the sales manager and with printed material from the company.
CON (Factor 1)	.8817 (6 items)	Training methods clearly met my needs.
CON (Factor 2)	.8901 (6 items)	Training content clearly met my needs (exclusive of selling techniques).
CON (Factor 3)	.8380 (3 items)	Company provided as much training as I needed in a well-planned program. I received training in selling techniques that met my needs.
CON (Factor 4)	.7477 (3 items)	Sales manager's feedback re: my performance face-to-face, in writing, and by telephone.
IT (Factor 1)	.8538 (4 items)	Opportunity to use skills, work independently, make decisions, and try out own ideas.
IT (Factor 2)	.8063 (4 items)	Opportunity for interaction with sales colleagues.
RCL	.8217 (6 items)	Clarity of understanding of authority, responsibility, customer expectations, use of time, best way to sell, and ability to modify rules. (Note: This indicator is the reverse of role ambiguity.)
RCN	.7526 (2 items)	Inconsistencies, i.e., incompatible requests or the need to "buck" rules and/or policies.
SAT (Factor 1)	.8836 (5 items)	Evaluation of the sales manager re: style and approach, and the manner in which performance feedback is given.
SAT (Factor 2)	.7393 (3 items)	My job is challenging, provides opportunity for advancement in the company. Promotion is based on ability.
SAT (Factor 3)	.5932 (2 items)	Satisfaction with sales colleagues.

TABLE 1 (continued)

Indicator Variable*	Alpha	Description
PERF (Factor 1)	.7823 (7 items)	Performance re: reporting and control of costs associated with the sales job.
PERF (Factor 2)	.8688 (4 items)	Performance re: customer sales interaction.
PERF (Factor 3)	.8873 (5 items)	Performance associated with sales and profit generation.
COM (Factor 1)	.8736 (4 items)	Overall positive feelings re: staying with the company and the extent to which one will make an effort to remain.
COM (Factor 2)	.8381 (3 items)	Degree of personal involvement with job and the importance of the job to the self.

Note: Alpha is Pearson's Coefficient Alpha. Questionnaire items may be requested from the first author.

\*REAL = realism; CON = congruence; IT = initiation-to-task; RCL = role clarity; RCN = role conflict; SAT = satisfaction; PERF = performance; and COM = commitment.

manager scores indicate what they believe to be the case for their salespersons. The perceptions of salespersons and sales managers are significantly different for four of the five socialization factors. Sales manager means are significantly greater than the salesperson means for realism ( $p < .001$ ), congruence ( $p = .001$ ), and initiation-to-task ( $p = .020$ ). That is, sales managers perceive the organization to have accomplished the socialization process, in terms of realism, congruence, and initiation-to-task, significantly more effectively than the salespeople perceived it to have been accomplished. For role clarity, the opposite occurs—the sales manager mean score for items concerning salesperson role clarity is significantly less than the salesperson mean ( $p = .028$ ). That is, the sales managers perceive there is less role clarity present than what the sales force does. No significant difference is found between the sales manager and salesperson means for the role conflict items. In summary, the perceptions of salespersons and sales managers differ for four aspects

TABLE 2. Correlations Between Salesperson Socialization Factors and Associated Outcomes

Construct*	REAL	CON	IT	RCL	RCN <sup>1</sup>	SAT	PERF	COM
REAL	1.000							
CON	.505 <sup>a</sup>	1.000						
IT	.324 <sup>a</sup>	.293 <sup>a</sup>	1.000					
RCL	.283 <sup>b</sup>	.213	.583 <sup>a</sup>	1.000				
RCN <sup>1</sup>	.115	.072	.259 <sup>b</sup>	.421 <sup>a</sup>	1.000			
SAT	.358 <sup>a</sup>	.327 <sup>a</sup>	.582 <sup>a</sup>	.471 <sup>a</sup>	.176	1.000		
PERF	.337 <sup>a</sup>	.137	.233 <sup>b</sup>	.404 <sup>a</sup>	.082	.152	1.000	
COM	.357 <sup>a</sup>	.138	.478 <sup>a</sup>	.459 <sup>a</sup>	.096	.454 <sup>a</sup>	.422 <sup>a</sup>	1.000

Note: a:  $p < .01$   
b:  $p < .05$

\*REAL = realism; CON = congruence; IT = initiation-to-task; RCL = role clarity; RCN = role conflict; SAT = satisfaction; PERF = performance; and COM = commitment.

<sup>1</sup>Role conflict items were reverse-scored. Thus, the positive correlations in Table 2 should be interpreted as correlations between the factors and salespersons' perceived lack of role conflict.

of the salesperson socialization experience: realism, congruence, initiation-to-task, and role clarity.

In terms of the outcome variables, the salesperson means are significantly higher for both performance ( $p = .002$ ) and commitment ( $p = .004$ ) than the sales managers' means. In other words, the sales force perceives their job performance and commitment to the organization to be much higher than their sales managers do. No significant difference is found between the sales manager and salesperson means for job satisfaction, suggesting both groups have similar perceptions of the amount of job satisfaction experienced by salespersons.

To further analyze the difference in perceptions between salespersons and sales managers, differences between the means of the socialization constructs for both groups were operationalized as gaps. That is, gaps are the differences in means for the salespersons and sales managers for each socialization construct. Gap correlations, representing the relationships between the difference in these

TABLE 3. T-Tests for Differences in Means for Salespersons and Sales Managers

Construct*	Salesperson		Sales Manager		T Value	d.f.	2-tail probability
	Mean (n)	s.d.	Mean (n)	s.d.			
REAL	4.177 (79)	1.760	5.577 (26)	1.181	3.78	103	0.000
CON	3.892 (76)	0.873	4.531 (24)	0.607	3.33	98	0.001
IT	5.869 (81)	0.912	6.306 (27)	0.513	2.36	106	0.020
RCL	5.622 (81)	1.094	5.100 (27)	0.921	-2.23	106	0.028
RCN	5.639 (79)	1.498	5.574 (27)	1.246	-0.20	104	0.839
SAT	5.490 (78)	0.920	5.689 (27)	0.656	1.04	103	0.301
PERF	4.736 (77)	0.915	4.089 (27)	0.917	-3.16	102	0.002
COM	6.419 (81)	0.549	6.022 (27)	0.772	-2.93	106	0.004

Note: Each mean is the average score of all the items used to measure that construct.

\*REAL = realism; CON = congruence; IT = initiation-to-task; RCL = role clarity; RCN = role conflict; SAT = satisfaction; PERF = performance; and COM = commitment.

two perceptions, were calculated as the correlations between the difference in the mean scores for these constructs (salespersons' means minus their sales managers' means) and the outcome variables. These gaps were constructed in order to analyze the correlations between perceptual differences for the socialization constructs in the salesperson-sales manager dyad and the outcome variables of satisfaction, performance, and commitment. Table 4 displays three sets of correlations between the socialization constructs and each of the outcome variables: salespersons' perceptions, sales managers' perceptions, and gap correlations.

TABLE 4. Correlations Between Socialization Factor and Outcomes for Salespersons, Sales Managers' Perceptions of Salespersons, and Gaps Between These Perceptions

Construct*	SAT	PERF	COM
REAL (Salesperson)	.358 <sup>a</sup>	.337 <sup>a</sup>	.357 <sup>a</sup>
REAL (Sales Manager)	.105	-.024	-.063
REAL Gap	.246 <sup>b</sup>	.289 <sup>b</sup>	.342 <sup>a</sup>
CON (Salesperson)	.327 <sup>a</sup>	.137	.138
CON (Sales Manager)	-.003	.076	.073
CON Gap	.293 <sup>b</sup>	.084	.057
IT (Salesperson)	.582 <sup>a</sup>	.233 <sup>b</sup>	.478 <sup>a</sup>
IT (Sales Manager)	.103	.173	.105
IT Gap	.490 <sup>a</sup>	.126	.394 <sup>a</sup>
RCL (Salesperson)	.471 <sup>a</sup>	.404 <sup>a</sup>	.459 <sup>a</sup>
RCL (Sales Manager)	.144	-.026	-.030
RCL Gap	.261 <sup>b</sup>	.326 <sup>a</sup>	.389 <sup>a</sup>

Note: Salesperson correlations reflect the relationships between salespersons' perceptions and the outcome variables. Sales manager correlations indicate the relationships between sales managers' perceptions of what their salesperson experiences and the outcome variables. The gap correlations represent the relationships between the difference in these two perceptions, and is calculated as the difference in the mean scores for these constructs (salespersons' means minus their sales managers' means) and the outcome variables.

Note: a:  $p < .01$   
b:  $p < .05$

\*REAL = realism; CON = congruence; IT = initiation-to-task; RCL = role clarity; RCN = role conflict; SAT = satisfaction; PERF = performance; and COM = commitment.

One interesting finding in Table 4, although not dealing with gaps per se, has to do with the sales manager correlations. These correlations indicate the relationships between sales managers' perceptions of the socialization process for their salesperson and the outcome variables. All of these correlations were found to be *insig-*

nificant. That is, there is no statistically significant relationship between sales managers' perceptions of the socialization process and any of the salesperson outcome variables. Practically speaking, the managers do not seem to feel that the activities involved in socializing salespeople "pay off" in terms of improved performance or higher levels of organizational commitment and job satisfaction.

In looking specifically at the gap correlations, significant positive relationships ( $p < .05$ ) are indicated for the correlations between four of the socialization function gaps (realism, congruence, initiation-to-task, and role clarity) and the outcome variables in Table 4. Recall from Table 3 that sales manager means are significantly greater than the salesperson means for realism, congruence, and initiation-to-task. Thus, the positive correlations for these three socialization factor gaps suggest that as the perceptual gap between the salesperson and the sales manager gets smaller, there is an increase in salesperson job satisfaction, performance, and organizational commitment. For role clarity, which Table 3 indicated was perceived to be greater by salespersons than their sales managers, the correlations with each of the outcome variables were also positive. Thus, as the role clarity gap increases (i.e., salespeople perceive role clarity to be greater than their managers do), there is also an increase in the outcomes of job satisfaction, performance, and organizational commitment. The role conflict gap was the only gap not found to have significant relationships with the outcome variables. This is consistent with Table 3, which indicated the sales manager and salesperson means for role conflict were not significantly different.

### DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Several relationships are hypothesized in this study between sales force socialization factors and certain performance outcomes. Sales force socialization is defined in terms of realism, initiation-to-task, congruence, role clarity, and role conflict. These socialization factors were expected to have a significant influence on the salesperson's perception of job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and performance. The results of this study generally support these

hypothesized relationships in a professional services setting. In particular, realism, initiation-to-task, and role clarity are each positively related to all three outcome variables (job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and performance), and congruence is positively associated with job satisfaction. Thus, to the extent to which the organization successfully addresses these factors, salesperson perception of performance, as well as commitment to and satisfaction with the organization, will be enhanced.

No support is found for a direct relationship between role conflict and any of the outcome variables. However, Table 2 does suggest that role conflict is significantly correlated with role clarity and initiation-to-task, both of which do have a significant positive relationship with the three outcome variables. Thus, salesperson perceptions of role conflict appear to be at least indirectly related to job satisfaction, performance, and organizational commitment.

The data further suggest the perceptions of the relative success of the sales force socialization process differ between salespersons and sales managers in two regards. First, sales managers perceived realism, congruence, and initiation-to-task to be greater than their salespeople did, and role clarity to be less. This suggests a positive bias on the part of the sales manager to the role the organization and the manager himself/herself plays in the socialization process. Just as the salespeople believe their performance to be better than that perceived by their managers, so too, perhaps, the sales managers believe their performance (in terms of facilitating the socialization process) to be better than that perceived by their salespeople. This is not particularly surprising, given that the manager has already been effectively exposed to the socialization process and, hence, would be positively predisposed to that process. Second, sales managers did not perceive a link between the socialization process and the performance outcomes. Thus, while salespersons perceive the socialization process to have a significant impact on their commitment to the organization, job satisfaction, and performance, sales managers do not see the salesperson socialization process as that important.

*Implications.* In professional service organizations, salesperson socialization can impact outcomes such as job satisfaction, performance, and commitment to the organization. Further, many of the

elements that comprise salesperson socialization (such as realism, initiation-to-task, congruence, and role clarity) can often be controlled/managed by sales managers. This suggests managers in service organizations can influence salesperson job satisfaction, performance, and organizational commitment by focusing on the sales force socialization process. In order for the socialization process to be of maximum benefit to the organization, managers need a plan and process for formally undertaking the socialization process when a new salesperson joins the organization.

There are several areas on which professional service managers can focus to assist in the socialization process. Table 1, which offers a brief description of some of the items used to measure the socialization constructs, provides the basis for some suggestions. For example, sales managers who provide an accurate portrayal (either verbal or written) of the sales job, prior to the salesperson's acceptance of the position, can increase the realism aspect of the socialization process. Similarly, professional service organizations can increase salesperson congruence by providing training methods and content that meet the salesperson's needs, instruction in appropriate selling techniques, and timely feedback on the salesperson's performance. Initiation-to-task can be improved by providing the salesperson with opportunities to work independently, make his/her own decisions, and interact with sales colleagues. Role clarity can be enhanced by giving the salesperson a clear understanding of his/her responsibility, authority, customer expectations, and the freedom he/she has to modify rules in a selling situation. Even if programs are in place to facilitate the socialization process of the sales force, the influence they can have on various salesperson outcomes suggests greater attention needs to be given to doing these "right."

In professional service organizations, sales manager perceptions of the socialization process may differ substantially from those of the sales force. Sales managers may not have an accurate picture of the salesperson socialization process, and may not properly perceive its value to the sales force. These two misconceptions could bias their judgment of the organization's effectiveness in this process. Sales manager bias can lead to complacency in improving the socialization process, less attention to the details necessary to successfully socialize the new salesperson, erroneous assumptions

regarding the level of salesperson job satisfaction and organizational commitment, and incorrect attributions used to explain perceived salesperson performance, all of which can lead to inappropriate, ineffective, and incomplete managerial and organizational responses.

To summarize:

- The attention the professional service organization and its management gives to addressing the factors involved in the socialization process will significantly impact the salesperson's level of job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and perceived performance.
- Both the sales manager, through direct contact with the salesperson, and the organization, through its formal programs and the culture it creates, are active participants in the socialization process.
- Significant gaps exist between the salesperson's and sales manager's perception of the effectiveness of the socialization process. In particular, the sales manager feels that the salesperson is more effectively socialized than the salesperson believes himself/herself to be, but, nevertheless, does not perceive this process to be particularly important in terms of assuring improved salesperson performance, commitment, and satisfaction.
- The greater the gaps which exist between the salesperson and the sales manager, the less satisfied with and committed to the organization is the salesperson.
- Addressing these gaps seems to be a logical basis for formulating strategies and tactics to ensure consistent expectations and experiences on the part of the salesperson. In so doing, the likelihood of obtaining desired outcomes from the sales force may be enhanced.
- Because the process of socialization is ongoing in most organizations, with new salespersons entering frequently, it would seem appropriate for the organization to periodically evaluate the existence of perceptual gaps, as well as the effectiveness of the formal socialization process in the organization.



In conclusion, the ability to effectively integrate the salesperson into the professional service organization is a delicate and very important task which deserves the serious attention of management. It affects salesperson commitment to the organization, job satisfaction, and performance.

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