

ROLE CONFLICT, TENSION AND
JOB SATISFACTION: A STUDY
OF MEDICAL REPRESENTATIVES

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W P No. 193
Jan. 1978

The main objective of the working paper series
of the IIMA is to help faculty members
to test out their research findings
at the pre-publication stage.

INDIAN INSTITUTE OF MANAGEMENT
AHMEDABAD

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I. INTRODUCTION

Many factors make the salesman's role within an organization unique:

1. It is a boundary role at the interface between the firm and its market environment. His role-set extends outwards into his customer groups and inwards into his organization and his task is to reconcile the conflicting goals and expectations of a number of role partners.
2. He often faces new and unusual demands which require innovative handling and creative approaches. He rarely has access to a clear set of standard operating procedures for guidance.
3. His performance has a direct and important impact on the effectiveness of a number of other functionaries in the organization who have a vital stake in influencing his activities and behaviour.
4. Because of the physical distance involved from the rest of the organization, the salesman often feels lonely and isolated, while at the same time, he is highly protective of his autonomy and independence.

These unique characteristics produce a high potential for role conflict, tension and job dissatisfaction among salesmen. The present study was designed to empirically examine the following questions:

1. What are the most significant determinants of the concepts of role conflict, role clarity, quality of supervision, job tension and job satisfaction?

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2. How are role conflict, tension, and satisfaction in a salesman's job related to each other and with other important organizational variables like role clarity, quality of supervision, and the length of service with the company?

Previous research conducted on role conflict, tension and job satisfaction in various organizational settings provided the working hypotheses that were tested in the present study. These hypotheses were as follows:

- H₁ : Role conflict is negatively related to satisfaction with quality of supervision, job satisfaction, role clarity and experience on the job and is positively related to tension.
- H₂ : Job tension is negatively related to satisfaction with quality of supervision, job satisfaction, job experience and role clarity and is positively related to role conflict.
- H₃ : Job satisfaction is negatively related to role conflict and tension and is positively related to satisfaction with supervision, job experience and role clarity.

II. THE STUDY

The data for the study were obtained from a sample of 31 medical representatives located in Ahmedabad, representing a cross-section of pharmaceutical companies, with the help of the local Medical Representatives Association. Nearly 65% of the respondents belonged to companies with an annual turnover of above Rs. 10 crores each. Some 60% of the representatives drawn in the sample worked for pharmaceutical companies with foreign collaboration/affiliations.

Besides the unique characteristics already mentioned, the choice of medical representatives as a group for this study was influenced by the following additional factors:

1. Pharmaceutical companies in India operate in a highly competitive environment and high competitive pressure would normally create a great deal of tension among medical representatives.
2. Introduction of new products is very common in this industry which makes additional demands on the salesmen to acquire new technical knowledge often and impart it to doctors.
3. Personal selling is perhaps the single most important element of the marketing mix used by pharmaceutical companies in their overall marketing strategies. Medical representatives, therefore, are under continuous pressure to improve their performance.

4. As a group of professional salesmen, medical representatives have higher "expectations" from their organizations and have more complex satisfaction needs than salesmen in many other fields.
5. While status equality between the salesmen and their customers generally increases the effectiveness of salesmen (Ditz, 1967; Gadel, 1964; Evans, 1963; Wittreich, 1962), medical representatives face considerable status inequality in their dealings with highly educated and often economically prosperous group of doctors. The task of influencing the doctors to prescribing their company's drugs and of imparting to them information on drugs has to be achieved within this constraint.
6. In their external role set, medical representatives have to deal with diverse groups of professional doctors on the one hand and commercially oriented chemists on the other hand. In view of highly divergent expectations and demands of these two groups, the medical representatives require a high degree of flexibility, innovativeness and patience in the performance of their tasks.

III. VARIABLES

The key variables included in the study were operationalized and measured on the basis of multiple items, scores of which were used to compute the indexes. An attempt was made to weight the items by their perceived importance but differential weighting did not prove superior to equal weighting and results reported in this paper are confined only to equal weighting of the items. Questions used to measure each variable and to develop the indexes are provided in Exhibit I.

- a. Role conflict was viewed as a multi-dimensional phenomenon arising out of: (i) conflicting expectations and demands from customers, superiors, other employees of the organization and the family, (ii) inconsistencies in the job requirements with personal values and norms, and (iii) constraints imposed by company rules and policies.
- b. Role clarity was defined as the extent to which medical representatives are provided with the required information about the performance of their job activities, their perceived clarity about the limits and scope of their authority and their clarity about the company rules and procedures affecting their job performance. Since lack of performance feedback has long been a bone of contention between salesmen and their managers (Dorr, 1963), a measure of adequacy of such feedback was also included in this index.

- c. Quality of supervision was defined as perceived discretion held by medical representatives in their operations, openness of communications with superiors, receptivity of superiors to their suggestions and influence of medical representatives in setting their sales goals and quotas.
- d. Job tension was viewed as perceived frequency with which medical representatives were psychologically bothered by work related matters, by inadequacy of feedback on performance, and by lack of clear communication.
- e. Job satisfaction was defined as medical representatives' satisfaction with organizational environment, autonomy, self-esteem, opportunity for innovativeness, job security, and prospects of advancement.

Also, overall measures of these concepts were obtained from the respondents. Data were gathered on the length of employment of the medical representatives with the present organization.

IV. RELIABILITY OF INDEXES

The coefficient alpha measure of reliability was determined for all the indexes by the formula:

$$r_{kk} = \frac{K r_{ij}}{1 + (K-1)r_{ij}}$$

where r_{kk} = reliability of multi-item measure

K = No. of items in measure

r = Average co-relation among items

The coefficients obtained in the research ranged from .67 for supervision to .84 for job satisfaction. The coefficient for role clarity was .75 and for both tension and role conflict .82. The values of these coefficients indicate acceptable levels of reliability for research of this type (Nunnally, 1967).

V. DETERMINANTS OF THE CONCEPTS

1. Role Conflict

The mean value of overall role conflict measure was 3.7 while the index value came to 2.9. This indicates that medical representatives do experience more conflict in their role, in a general sense, but are not able to pinpoint it to the same extent to its various dimensions.

The mean ratings on the statements included in this index indicated that conflict arose primarily from inability to pay adequate attention to family affairs (R_6), pressure from the organization to engage in sales tactics with which medical representatives did not fully agree (R_4), or which were not consistent with their personal norms and values (R_1), and resistance from customers in accepting their suggestions (R_3). Inconsistency between the expectations of the customers and those of supervisors from medical representatives also created conflicts (R_7).

In a multiple regression analysis, when overall measure of role conflict was regressed* with the index items, inconsistency with personal norms and values (R_1) was the only item which explained significant variance ($\alpha = .1$) of 27% in an overall measure of role conflict.

2. Role Clarity

The mean value of overall role clarity measure was 5.0 while the index value came to 4.6. This indicates that medical representatives do not generally face much role ambiguity but when their attention is drawn to specific aspects of role clarity, role ambiguity is felt to some extent.

The mean ratings on the statements included in this index indicated that role ambiguity arose primarily from inadequate feedback on performance (C_3), from lack of adequate information about what all had to be done on the job (C_1), and the way it had to be done (C_2).

In a multiple regression analysis, when overall measure of role clarity was regressed with the index items, inadequate information about how various things in the job were to be done (C_2) was the only item which explained significant variance ($\alpha = .1$) of 29% in an overall measure of role clarity.

3. Satisfaction with Quality of Supervision

The mean value of overall measure of satisfaction with the quality of supervision was 3.6 while the index mean came to 3.4.

The mean ratings on the statements included in this index indicated that dissatisfaction with supervision arose primarily from inability to adequately influence the sales goals set for the individuals (SP_4), and perceived failure of the supervisors in fully appreciating the suggestions and recommendations of the medical representatives (SP_3). To some extent, inability to communicate their problems to the supervisors was also a contributory cause of dissatisfaction with supervision (SP_2).

*Since index was formed from the items, index score was not considered appropriate for use as a dependent variable in these regressions. Instead, overall measure score was preferred.

Multiple regression analysis showed that index items explained 53% of variance in an overall measure of satisfaction with the quality of supervision. The two items that were significant in explaining this variance were inability to communicate problems to supervisors (SP_2) and the way their suggestions and recommendations were treated by the supervisors (SP_3), the respective α values being .01 and .1.

4. Job Tension

The mean value of overall job tension was 3.5 while the index value came to 2.9. Thus the respondents overestimated the overall tension in the job, but their focus on specific dimensions of tension indicated that the phenomenon was less pronounced than the tension that was perceived to be prevailing in a general manner.

The mean ratings on the statements comprising this index indicated that major causes of tension were pressure to perform certain job activities against personal judgement (T_7), availability of adequate information to carry out various activities (T_4), emphasis on quantity rather than quality of work (T_6), overall work load (T_5), conflicting demands of superiors (T_8), and difficulties in convincing customers (T_9).

Multiple regression analysis showed that index items explained 66% of the variance in the overall measure. The two items that were significant in explaining this variance were heavy work load (T_5) and difficulties faced in convincing the customers (T_9), the respective α values being .01 and .1.

5. Job Satisfaction

The mean value of overall job satisfaction was 4.4 and the index value obtained was 4.1. The mean ratings on the statements comprising this index indicated that lack of opportunity in the job in preparing for future advancement (S_5), less than total involvement (S_6), inability to determine own goals (S_1) and lack of full appreciation of their job by other departments of the company (S_4) were perceived as the major reasons for job dissatisfaction among medical representatives.

Multiple regression analysis showed that index items explained 78% of the variance in the overall measure of job satisfaction. The items that were most significant in explaining this variance ($\alpha = .01$) were less than total involvement in the job (S_6) and lack of advancement opportunity (S_5). Inability to determine own goals (S_1) and overall liking for the organization as a place of work (S_7) were also significant at .05 level.

VI. TESTS OF HYPOTHESES

Table I presents correlations of indexes on role conflict, tension and job satisfaction with the various variables included in the hypotheses and indicates support for each one.

Table I

CORRELATIONS OF CONFLICT, TENSION AND JOB SATISFACTION

Variables	Co-Relations		Job Satisfaction
	Conflict	Tension	
1. Job Satisfaction Index	-.65*	-.58*	1
2. Role Clarity Index	-.34**	-.27***	.44*
3. Satisfaction with Supervision Index	-.52*	-.54*	.69*
4. Tension Index	.72*	1	-.58*
5. Job Experience	-.26***	-.23***	.26***
6. Role Conflict	1	.72*	-.65*

* $\alpha = .01$ ** $\alpha = .05$ *** $\alpha = .1$

1. Role Conflict: The correlations of role conflict with all the other variables are statistically significant. The correlations indicate that lesser the job satisfaction, role clarity, satisfaction with supervision and job experience and greater the tension, more the role conflict.

A multiple regression analysis with role conflict index as a dependent variable and the above mentioned five independent variables showed that 61% of the variance in role conflict index measure was explained by these variables. While all the independent variables had their hypothesized signs in the regression equation, only tension and job satisfaction turned out to be significant at .01 and .05 level respectively. Role conflict, thus, has a substantial association with role tension and job satisfaction.

2. Job Tension: The correlations of job tension with all other variables are statistically significant. The correlations indicate that greater the job satisfaction, role clarity, satisfaction with supervision, and job experience but lesser the role conflict, lesser the tension.

A multiple regression analysis with job tension index as a dependent variable showed that 60% of the variance in tension index was explained by the five independent variables. While all the independent variables had their hypothesized signs in the regression equation, only role conflict and job experience turned out to be significant at .01 & .05 level respectively. Role tension, thus, has a substantial association with role conflict and job experience.

3. Job Satisfaction: The correlations of job satisfaction with all the other variables are statistically significant. The correlations indicate that greater the role clarity, satisfaction with supervision, and job experience but lesser the tension and role conflict, more the job satisfaction.

A multiple regression analysis with job satisfaction index as a dependent variable showed that 67% of the variance in job satisfaction index was explained by the five independent variables. While all the independent variables had their hypothesized signs in the regression equation, only satisfaction with supervision and role conflict turned out to be significant at .01 and .05 level respectively. Job satisfaction, thus, has a substantial association with quality of supervision and role conflict.

VII. IMPLICATIONS

A number of implications emerge from the results of this study. These are discussed under managerial implications and methodological implications.

1. Managerial Implications: Every sales manager is interested in improving job satisfaction and decreasing role conflict and tension among his salesmen. If he has a variety of variables to monitor and control for the achievement of objectives relating to increased job satisfaction and decreased tension and conflict, where should he focus his primary attention? The findings of this research provide important clues towards action strategies for the achievement of these objectives. The major recommendations that emerge are:

- a. Medical representatives assign considerable importance to their personal norms and values. Use of any sales tactics which are inconsistent with these norms and values cause significant role conflict and job tension which, in turn, cause job dissatisfaction. The sales manager has to develop a clear understanding of these norms and endeavour to develop sales strategy and tactics consistent with the prevailing standards of personal norms and values held by his sales force.

- b. Because of work pressures, medical representatives are worried over their inability to pay adequate attention to their family affairs. The sales manager should help enhance the self-worth of the salesman in the eyes of the family so that the family begins to rationalize his inadequate attention to its affairs in terms of his involvement in job and relatively higher order goals. The sales manager should also take friendly interest in the family related matters of the salesmen to develop a compensatory feeling. However, such an interest should be shown with due regard to the privacy of salesman's life and under no circumstances should come to be perceived as an "intervention".
- c. Satisfaction with the quality of supervision is one of the most important variables affecting job satisfaction. In this, medical representatives desire openness of communication, a greater appreciation of their suggestions and recommendations by the supervisors, and an opportunity to influence the sales goals and quotas set for them. When such conditions are laid down, they probably begin to feel that their supervisors are concerned about their work and are trying to help them do a good job. It should be realized that openness of communication is more important than the mere frequency of communication.
- d. Job experience is positively related to job satisfaction and negatively related to tension and conflict. Sales managers should, therefore, guard against excessive turnover in the organization, which limits the average life span of the sales force organization.
- e. Though lack of role clarity was not found to be a major problem in this group, there was some evidence that the group was concerned with inadequate feedback on performance and from lack of adequate information about the way various activities were to be performed on the job. The latter also causes some job tension.
- f. The feeling that medical representatives' job content does not prepare them for future advancement was quite predominant in the group and contributed significantly to the measure of job satisfaction. It is, therefore, important that companies not only concentrate on immediate job related matters in their refresher training programmes like providing technical information and detailing strategy on new and old drugs, but also provide them management oriented training which gives them a feeling of preparation for future higher responsibilities.
- g. In many occupations, lack of enough discretion has a negative impact on a worker's job satisfaction (Likert, 1967). The finding of this study is quite opposite. The medical representative's job is far less structured than most non-selling jobs. He often faces non-routine situations and unique customer demands. Consequently, he desires more direction and support than increased discretion. Nor does he want more opportunities for innovativeness. Perhaps the existing job demands already take a heavy "toll" of his innovative abilities.

In short, the study supports the contention that job goals should be clearly established for the salesmen and they should be furnished regular feedback on how well they are meeting the organization's expectations. A reciprocal information-flow and open communication need to be established between the salesmen and their supervisors for not only setting performance standards and for assessing performance but also for exchanging information on how the various activities of the job are to be performed and unique problems solved. An improved system of communication will create within the salesmen an increased commitment to attain their job goals and provide them an opportunity to express their discomfort on inconsistencies between organizational demands and their personal values. Finally, the research findings suggest that role conflict, tension and the quality of supervision are all important variables in the study of salesmen's job behaviour and satisfaction. A clearer understanding of the critical dimensions of these variables should assist the sales manager in his managerial tasks and processes.

2. Methodological Implications: Based on the experience of this study, two important research methodological suggestions are made:

- a. While developing the indexes, an attempt was made to use a two component model where each item was followed by a measure of its importance and the index value was computed on the basis of weighted average of the items (these results are not reported in this paper). The two-component model for the formation of indexes did not prove superior to the one-component model reported in the study in terms of its explanatory power.
- b. In general, overall measures of concepts like job satisfaction, conflict, tension, role clarity and satisfaction with quality of supervision were not as effective as indexes formed on the basis of the various dimensions of these concepts. Considerable explanatory power was lost when overall measures, instead of indexes, were used in both correlational and multiple regression analysis (the results of overall measures have been omitted from the paper). It is, therefore, suggested that multi-item measures be used in operationalizing and measuring such concepts.

VIII. FUTURE RESEARCH

It is suggested that this study be replicated using larger samples and in the context of other selling situations. It would be interesting to find out if importance being attached to personal norms in terms of their consistency with sales tactics is a unique phenomenon of professional selling in the pharmaceutical industry or else it is emerging as a significant phenomenon in the selling "profession" in general. Also, the finding that job experience

is positively related to job satisfaction and negatively related to conflict and tension needs further investigation. The average job experience of the medical representatives included in the study was eight years. Would the relationship hold good for a much larger period of job experience? It is possible that while relationship of job experience with tension and conflict may remain the same with extended period of job experience, its relationship with job satisfaction may change. In other words, the two variables of work experience and job satisfaction may be related curvilinearly where at some point in the life span of the salesman in the company, extended period of experience may begin to affect job satisfaction. It is generally seen that after some years, unless advanced or promoted, senior salesman begin to feel bored and lose some of the challenge and enthusiasm of the job. At what point such a decline sets in should be an intriguing question for the researcher to answer.

Also, based on some support from the findings of this study, the following additional hypotheses can be stated for formal testing in future research of this type:

- a. The lesser the salesman's need for additional discretion, the greater the job satisfaction.
- b. The greater the innovativeness required of salesman, the lower the job satisfaction.
- c. The longer the time a salesman has spent in his current position, the lower the role conflict and ambiguity.

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Exhibit I: QUESTIONNAIRE ITEMS USED TO DEVELOP INDEXES*
AND FOR OBTAINING OVERALL MEASURES

1. Role Conflict Index (2.9)** -- Determined from 7 questions scored on a 1 to 6 scale ranging from "Not at All" to "To a great extent".
 - R₁: To what extent does your job involve doing things which in certain ways are against your personal norms and values? (2.9)
 - R₂: To what extent some of your activities, which you consider important for effective performance of your job, are considered as unimportant by people working in other departments of your organization? (2.5)
 - R₃: To what extent do your clients/customers resist the suggestions made by you in your clients' best interests? (2.9)
 - R₄: To what extent your organization forces you to engage in sales tactics with which you do not agree? (3.2)
 - R₅: To what extent do you feel that you cannot meet customers'/clients' legitimate demands because of the rules and regulations of your organization? (2.7)
 - R₆: To what extent does your job prevent you from paying adequate attention to your family affairs? (3.2)
 - R₇: To what extent do you think that the expectations of your superiors and the expectations of your customers are contradictory to each other? (3.0)

2. Role Clarity Index(4.6) -- Determined from 5 questions scored on a 1 to 6 scale ranging from "Not at all Adequate" to "Very Adequate".
 - C₁: Do you feel your organization generally provides you with adequate information about what all you have to do on your job? (4.7)
 - C₂: Do you feel your ~~or~~ organization generally provides you with adequate information about how you are supposed to do various things on your job? (4.4)

* Previous research provided the basis for the selection of the items for the indexes. See Robert L. Kahn, et. al., Organizational Stress: Studies in Role Conflict and Ambiguity, Wiley, 1964; T.F. Lyons, "Role Clarity, Need for Clarity, Satisfaction, Tension and Withdrawal," Organizational Behaviour and Human Performance (January 1971), James H. Donnelly and J.M. Ivancovich, "Role Clarity and the Salesman," Journal of Marketing (January, 1975) and Martin Patchen, Participation, Achievement, and Involvement on the Job, Prentice-Hall, 1970.

**Figures in brackets give the mean values of the indexes, individual statements forming the indexes as well as for overall measures obtained from the survey data. Index values are computed by weighting the statements equally.

- C₃: Do you feel your superiors provide you with adequate feedback on your performance and progress? (3.8)
- C₄: Do you feel that you are generally quite clear about the limits and scope of your authority? (5.0)
- C₅: Do you feel that you are generally clear about the policies, rules and procedures of your company that affect the performance of your job? (5.1)

3. Quality of Supervision Index (3.4) — Determined from 4 questions scored on 1 to 6 scale ranging from "Not at All" to "Completely/Highly"

- SP₁: Do you feel that you have to perform your job strictly in accordance with the instructions of your supervisors or else you believe you have some discretion in deciding your operations and activities? (4.4)
- SP₂: Do you think you are able to satisfactorily communicate your problems to your superiors in the organization? (3.7)
- SP₃: To what extent are you satisfied with the way your suggestions/recommendations are treated by your superiors? (3.1)
- SP₄: To what extent do you influence the setting up of annual sales targets/quotas you have to meet? (2.5)

4. Job Tension Index (2.9) — Determined from 9 questions scored on a 1 to 6 scale ranging from "Never" to "Nearly all the Time"

- T₁: How often do you feel bothered by being unclear on just what the scope and responsibilities of your job are? (2.4)
- T₂: How often do you feel bothered by not knowing what opportunities for advancement or promotion exist for you? (2.5)
- T₃: How often do you feel bothered by not knowing what your immediate superior thinks about you in regard to your performance? (2.8)
- T₄: How often do you feel bothered by the fact that you can't get enough information to carry out various activities related to your job? (3.3)
- T₅: How often do you feel bothered by the fact that you have too heavy a work load? (3.0)
- T₆: How often do you feel bothered by the fact that the quantity (volume) of your work interferes with its quality (i.e. how well it gets done)? (3.1)
- T₇: How often do you feel bothered by the fact that you have to perform certain activities against your better judgement? (3.5)

- T₈: How often the thought that you won't be able to satisfy the conflicting demands of your superiors bothers you? (3.0)
- T₉: How often do you feel bothered by the fact that despite many calls and selling efforts, you are not able to convince the customers about your sales proposals? (3.0)

5. Job Satisfaction Index (4.1) — Determined from 9 questions scored on a 1 to 6 scale ranging from "Do not Agree at all" to "Strongly Agree".

- S₁: My job allows me to set my own goals and objectives (3.4).
- S₂: My job is very challenging (5.1).
- S₃: My organization considers my contribution important for its success (4.3)
- S₄: Employees working in other departments of the organization consider my job as an important one (3.8)
- S₅: My job provides me with the opportunity to prepare myself for future advancement (3.1)
- S₆: I feel totally involved in my job and time literally flies (3.6)
- S₇: I very much like my company as an organization to work for (5.0)
- S₈: My job provides me with a strong feeling of security (4.0)
- S₉: I get many opportunities to try out new ideas in my job (4.3)

6. Overall Measures — Determined from a single question scored on a 1 to 6 scale ranging from "Not at All" to "Highly/Completely". Overall measures refer to tension, supervision, satisfaction, role clarity and role conflict respectively.

- i) Considering your job on the whole, how relaxed do you generally feel about your job? (3.5)
- ii) Considering your job on the whole, to what extent you are pleased with the quality of supervision you get? (3.6)
- iii) Considering all aspects of your job, on the whole, how satisfied you feel in your present job? (4.4)
- iv) Considering all aspects of your job, on the whole, do you feel that generally you are as clear as you would like to be about various aspects of the job you have to perform? (5.0)
- v) Considering your job as a whole to what extent you feel it imposes on you conflicting demands from various sides (i.e. from your superiors, customers, family members, personal beliefs and values, etc.) (3.7)