The rapid increase of women in the sales world has brought about debates on the role of gender in contemporary sales organizations. The key question is whether gender differences, and of themselves, create different attitudinal and behavioral relationships. A small but expanding stream of research and the expanded participation of women in many lines of business question whether the traditional position of differences based on gender is valid today. A conceptual basis is developed in support of no differences based on gender and hypotheses are developed to test this premise across several constructs that have been found important in sales management research. This research examines a Fortune 500 international service organization with a sales force that is gender balanced. The results indicate few significant differences between genders. A gender classification scheme is proposed based on a gender balance in the sales force and customer base. Results are discussed and compared to previous studies. J BUSN RES 2000. 49:245–257. © 2000 Elsevier Science Inc. All rights reserved.

The rapid increase in the number of women employed as salespeople over the past 25 years has had an important impact on the sales profession. Although women experienced difficulty in the 1970s and 1980s in gaining entry into male-dominated sales organizations, the female salesperson of the 1990s has achieved success in a variety of previously male-oriented sales industries. Although executives and academics continue to debate the role and importance of gender in sales management processes, the conventional wisdom developed during the past two decades argues that important differences exist between male and female salespeople concerning their attitudes and behavior. Moreover, research findings suggest that these differences should be considered when making managerial decisions (Fugate, Decker, and Brewer, 1988; Gable and Reed, 1987; Busch and Bush, 1978). Additionally, the female salesperson may be subject to possible unique stressors such as sex discrimination and sexual harassment which increase the levels of stress (Jick and Mitz, 1985; Nelson and Quick, 1985).

Contemporary evidence, although limited, supports an alternative view concerning gender differences in field sales organizations (Schul and Wren, 1992; Siguaw and Honeycutt, 1995). Many of the seminal articles on women in the sales force are based on research conducted almost two decades ago (Busch and Bush, 1978; Swan, Futrell, and Todd, 1978; Swan and Futrell, 1978; Gibson and Swan, 1981). The general consensus of this early research is that gender differences are pervasive in selling organizations so sales managers must manage the genders differently (Fugate, Decker, and Brewer, 1988; Gable and Reed, 1987). The more recent research findings coupled with significant changes in the role of women in many organizations in the 1980s and 1990s suggest that the early attempts to find gender differences in sales organizations may no longer be relevant in the workplace. Importantly, emphasizing gender differences in management processes and interpersonal relationships may be counterproductive. Certainly, there is some risk to managing the genders differently. Bruning and Snyder (1983) comment that the current trends are to develop different programs or strategies for managing women in sales organizations, emphasizing that such recommendations may be commendable when true gen-
nder differences in attitudes or behavior exist. Yet in organizations or industries where there is an absence of differences concerning attitudes and behavior, creating special programs for women may facilitate sexism or lead to perceived sex differences where before there were none.

Recent research suggests that differences based on gender have diminished or instead may be in opposite directions from those suggested in prior research (Schul and Wren, 1992; Siguaw and Honeycutt, 1995). Today’s contemporary environment, along with the large numbers of women in the sales world (over 50% in some industries) may have reduced the effects of tokenism that were heavily present in the past (Spangler, Gordon, and Pipkin, 1978). Unfortunately, it is difficult to draw any authoritative conclusions about the relationship between organizational variables and gender differences in a sales environment because of the paucity of recent research. Further research into this important sales management issue is clearly needed.

In the absence of sound operating guidelines, sales managers are confronted with possible risks regardless of how they respond to the gender issue. Disregarding gender issues in management activities may present women with unreasonable performance hurdles if substantial gender differences are present. Moreover, employing different management processes based on gender when gender differences are not present is also a risky option. A key question is whether gender differences, in and of themselves, create different attitudinal and behavioral relationships. For example, given an existing model of sales constructs are there differences in the relationships between constructs based on gender? Underlying this question is the issue of whether management should consider decisions without regard to gender, or instead, create some kind of “dual” system based upon unique gender contrasts.

Our objective is to examine the differences based on gender for several sales constructs such as organizational commitment, intention to leave, role stress, and job satisfaction. We compare results with previous research and expand the knowledge base of gender differences by focusing on a turbulent and rapidly changing international services selling environment. We examine the gender difference issue in a single organization, avoiding the possible effects of variations in the selling environment on the research results. In addition, we classify previous studies on a gender grid based on customer rewards, expectations, and aspirations of male and female salespeople. Their sample consisted of 59 male and 54 female real estate salespeople. The authors found no differences between the genders on intrinsic rewards, but did find some extrinsic reward differences. However, when controlled for age the results displayed few differences between the genders. If age was not controlled, there were significant differences on the tested variables. It is also important to note that the percentage of female salespeople was close to 50% and that the real estate customer base also has heavy female representation.

Schul and Wren (1992) examined gender differences in job

Background

The effects of gender on sales management decision making have been studied for over two decades, although most of this research was conducted over a decade ago. Table 1 summarizes the major research studies. An early study examining a variety of sales variables by gender found that women had lower role clarity than did their male counterparts and displayed a higher propensity to leave the organization (Busch and Bush, 1978). This study also found that men placed more importance of promotion than did their female counterparts, and that women salespeople put more importance on coworkers. No differences were found between men and women salespeople on job satisfaction and value importance. The researchers commented that their sample came from an industry that was male dominated and that the female’s co-workers, managers, and customers were likely to be male. The authors observed that the heavily male-dominated industry could possibly explain some of the gender differences.

Another study examined male and female retail managers and found negligible differences over 25 variables (Brief and Oliver, 1976). One possible explanation for the lack of significant differences might be that retailing has traditionally employed a much higher proportion of women, and the customer base also tends to be female oriented. In contrast, Swan, Furell, and Todd (1978) examined pharmaceutical sales and found a number of significant differences in the two groups. Not surprisingly, the level of female salespersons in the pharmaceutical industry in 1978 was comparatively low. The researchers found that the female sales force views the sales job differently than did their male colleagues. Interestingly, the experience levels between males and females in the study were significantly different with men having much more sales experience. The authors felt that many of the females in the study were “pioneers” into a male-dominated job and as a result they felt lower satisfaction with the job, peers, and supervisors. As a result, the authors call for management to design and implement special programs for the female salesperson. Given the expanded participation of women in many sales organizations today, the relevance of special programs for female salespeople in the contemporary selling environment is less clear.

Gibson and Swan (1981) found few differences in job rewards, expectations, and aspirations of male and female salespeople. Their sample consisted of 59 male and 54 female real estate salespeople. The authors found no differences between the genders on intrinsic rewards, but did find some extrinsic reward differences. However, when controlled for age the results displayed few differences between the genders. If age was not controlled, there were significant differences on the tested variables. It is also important to note that the percentage of female salespeople was close to 50% and that the real estate customer base also has heavy female representation.
Table 1. Sales Force Gender Studies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Study (Year)</th>
<th>Sample (Industry)</th>
<th>Primary Variables</th>
<th>Primary Results</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Brief and Oliver (1976)</td>
<td>Retail sales</td>
<td>Organization and organization level</td>
<td>No differences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Busch and Bush (1978)</td>
<td>Pharmaceuticals</td>
<td>Job satisfaction, values, role clarity, performance, propensity to leave</td>
<td>Women lower in role clarity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Swan, Futrell, and Todd</td>
<td>Pharmaceutical</td>
<td>Job satisfaction, self-confidence, perceptions of management control, career goals</td>
<td>Men and women differ in their views of the job</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(1978)</td>
<td>396 males 35 females</td>
<td></td>
<td>Females indicated greater importance for independence in their work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gibson and Swan (1981)</td>
<td>Real estate</td>
<td>Job rewards, aspiration</td>
<td>No differences in gender for expectations of success</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gable and Reed (1987)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Women are under represented in sales forces</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fugate, Decker, and Brewer</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Men and women work differently</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(1988)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>McNeilly and Goldsmith (1991)</td>
<td>Travel, products, insurance, real estate</td>
<td>Job satisfaction, intent-to leave</td>
<td>Men and women turnover for different reasons</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Siguaw and Honeycutt (1995)</td>
<td>Roster of the Association for Information and Image Management</td>
<td>Job satisfaction, organizational commitment, role conflict, role ambiguity, performance</td>
<td>Women report lower conflict and ambiguity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strutton, Pelton, and Lumpkin</td>
<td>Industrial organization</td>
<td>Ingratiation sales tactics</td>
<td>Males more likely to use ingratiation tactics</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

satisfaction, organizational commitment, rewards, role stress, performance, and intention to leave. These variables were selected based on their inclusion in previous studies. While they reported no significant differences based on gender for job satisfaction, organizational commitment, intrinsic reward preferences, role ambiguity, and self-reported performance, the study did find significant gender differences for extrinsic reward preference, role conflict, supervisory-based performance, and intention to leave. Schul and Wren tentatively concluded that the female salesperson needs little special managerial emphasis, although they point to the need for more study in different environments on the gender issue.

More recently, Strutton, Pelton, and Lumpkin (1995) looked at the differences in male and female salespeople based on the use of ingratiating tactics used in efforts to influence prospects and customers. The authors found that male salespeople were more likely to use self-enhancement, self-promotion, favor-rendering, and attitudinal conformity. Another recent study looked at gender effects on job satisfaction and intention to leave (McNeilly and Goldsmith, 1991). The sample was a cross-sectional sample with respondents representing four industries; travel (12 respondents), products (31), insurance (41), and real estate (54). Results indicated that male and female sales reps leave the organization for different reasons. The authors argue that managers must consider the differences in the genders and modify their motivation techniques accordingly. While probably not feasible due to subgroup size, it would be interesting to test for gender differences within each industry.

Russ and McNeilly (1995) found that gender moderates the link between organizational commitment and turnover intentions. The study’s sample was comprised of 77 female and 73 male sales reps for a publishing firm. They also found a joint moderator effect of gender and experience on the
strength of the relationship between turnover intentions and organizational commitment. Russ and McNeilly conclude that managers who treated male and female sales reps the same would have missed potential differences by gender. They further suggest that sales managers need to search for reasons of turnover intentions for women, focusing on social relationships. More care should be taken in assigning female representatives to sales districts and/or first-level manager. Thus, this research supports the position that differences based on gender are valid in the contemporary selling environment.

Siguaw and Honeycutt (1995) examined gender-related differences regarding job satisfaction, organizational commitment, role conflict, role ambiguity, and performance. The sample consisted of responses from firms listed in the Association for Information and Image Management. The results indicated significant differences for only role ambiguity and slight differences for role conflict. The male sales personnel experienced more role ambiguity and conflict than did their female counterparts. The authors also found that women were engaged more frequently in customer-oriented selling than were their male counterparts.

Synthesizing the findings of the various gender studies and taking into account the time period in which the research was conducted, two implications appear important. First, there is support for the position that gender differences may not exist, at least in some types of selling situations. Second, when gender differences do occur, they may be due to the characteristics of particular selling environments.

### Classifying Gender Difference Situations

The reality is that the research findings concerning gender differences are not consistent. We believe that a major factor in the lack of consistency is due to the mix of males and females in the various sales scenarios. The evidence from empirical research and sales management practice points to two major factors that may be potentially useful in explaining gender differences: (1) the female-male mix of the sales force, and (2) the female-male mix of the customer base. As previous studies have shown there tends to be differing managerial strategies depending upon the level of male-versus female-oriented sales forces. Certainly we have seen that customer bases that were traditionally male oriented tended to also have male selling forces.

Over time, as females joined both sides of the buyer–seller relationship, the managerial strategies for gender in the sales forces have changed (Schul and Wren, 1992). Although studies have not specifically examined genders of the customer base, there most likely are managerial strategies that are also dependent upon the level of males versus females in the customer base.

### Gender-Balanced Circle

A possible classification scheme based on the gender mix in the sales force and customer base is shown in Figure 1. The circle in the center of Figure 1 represents the new (1990s) gender-balanced portion of the model. The gender-balanced circle consists of a grid with male-female-dominated sales forces as anchors horizontally and female-male-dominated customer base as anchors vertically. The circle in the middle of the figure represents sales forces that have a “balance” of gender in the sales force implying that the gender of the sales force is not heavily skewed in favor of one gender. The circle also implies that the customer base in evenly split on the gender dimension. For example, the sample in Busch and Bush (1978) was comprised of 92% males and 8% female sales personnel. In addition, the pharmaceutical industry customer base was also heavily male. As a result, the study is located in the lower left quadrant clearly outside the gender balance circle.

We propose that few differences in the sales force based on gender will occur for selling situations in the gender-balanced circle. It appears that the Schul and Wren (1992) research site was in the gender-balance area, although the customer base is likely to be more toward the male-dominated portion of the grid. This study suggests that when the gender mix is more balanced, gender differences are not present even though they were found by Busch and Bush (1978) in the same industry in a male-dominated sales force. These findings and other studies displaying few gender differences (Table 1) support the position that few gender differences will be found in the contemporary sales environment, particularly for situations within the gender-balanced circle. Note from Figure 1 that previous studies fall into the bottom left quadrant (male-dominated customer and sales personnel) or into the gender-balanced circle.

Quadrant 1 is considered to be the traditional cell with most of the historical studies from the 1970s and the 1980s falling into this area. In this situation, the sales force is dominated by males, as is the customer base. Previous studies have indicated that differences exist by gender in the sales force and therefore, management must employ differing strategies when managing their male versus female sales force.

Quadrant 3 has a dominant female sales force and a female customer base. Although we were unable to find any studies that met these conditions, the assumption is that managerial decisions could be different based upon an abundance of female sales personnel and customers. An example of a Quadrant 3 selling situation is the Mary Kay Cosmetics company.

The second and fourth quadrants are labeled uncertain because it is unknown how gender might be affected with a male sales force and a female customer base or vice versa. We were unable to find any research findings that apply to either quadrant. These selling situations may occur only on a limited basis, or instead portray transitional situations. Typically, there
Figure 1. Classification scheme based on sender mix. A = Busch and Bush (1978); B = Brief and Oliver (1976); C = Gibson and Swan (1981); D = Swan, Futrell and Todd (1978); E = Schul and Wren (1992); F = Stratton, Pelton and Lumpkin (1995); G = Russ and McNeilly (1995); H = Siguaw and Honeycutt (1995). I = This study

are pressures on both the seller and buyer organizations to recruit people from both genders.

The remaining part of the classification scheme is the gender-balanced section found in the center of the figure. We propose that when there is a balance of gender in both the sales force and in the customer base, there will be minimum significant gender differences in the sales force when sales organizational variables are examined. Previous studies have been plotted on the grid. The gender-based samples were from retail and real estate industries that even in the 1970s were heavily populated by women. The percentage of male-female in the sales force was acquired from sample information in each study but the customer gender orientation was judgmentally determined based on historical assumptions.

It should be noted that the McNeilly and Goldsmith (1991) study has a very mixed sample base with some of the respondents being from “traditional” male-dominated industries and some being from a more gender-balanced industry. Moreover, the reasons for leaving the organization may be industry specific rather than gender based. As a result, the study is not included on Figure 1 because the findings could be misleading based on our gender-balanced arguments. It would be useful to examine each of four selling situation categories in the McNeilly and Goldsmith (1991) study as the samples from the four industries are likely to occupy different positions on Figure 1. The selling situations are different across the four industries. Unfortunately, the samples are very small.

Hypotheses

Based on Schul and Wren (1992), Siguaw and Honeycutt (1995), and other studies which are located within the gender-balanced circle, we propose that there will be very few differences in male and female salespeople for a variety of constructs. Schul and Wren (1992) concluded, “that women working in integrated salesforces appear to be succeeding . . . unencumbered by many pressures previously thought to inhibit their progress.” The authors also indicate that there are more similarities than differences between male and female salespeople. Accordingly, we believe that gender differences will not be present for organizations positioned in the gender-balanced circle of Figure 1, with a few exceptions as indicated in the following discussion.

In an attempt to provide a meaningful examination of gender differences in sales organizations, we consider several constructs included in prior studies and also include other constructs that may be potentially relevant concerning gender differences. These constructs provide an extensive basis for considering the effects of gender on several important factors of interest to both academic researchers and sales managers.

Role Stress

Role stress (stress linked to specific aspects of the individual’s role in the organization) has received substantial research attention (Ford, Walker, and Churchill, 1975; Johnston et al.,
Two major components of stress are role ambiguity and role conflict. These constructs have been found to have a significant affect on job-related attitudes and behaviors (Jackson and Schuler, 1985; Michaels and Dixon, 1994). Building on prior research foundations on job satisfaction, we selected the two components of role stress.

Rizzo, House, and Lirtzman (1970) define role ambiguity as the situation where an individual does not have clear direction about the expectations of his or her role in the job or organization. The salesperson who feels that she/he does not have enough information to perform the job adequately may experience role ambiguity. Rizzo, House, and Lirtzman (1970) define role conflict as incompatibility in communicated expectations that impinge on perceived role performance. For example, when the requests of a customer and a supervisor are at odds, the salesperson is likely to experience role conflict.

Siguaw and Honeycutt (1995) found significant differences in role ambiguity between male and female salespeople. However, their sample contained only 10.4% female salespeople, a non-balanced sample. Busch and Bush (1978) found a greater degree of role ambiguity present in the female portion of their sample compared to their male colleagues. In addition, the authors argued that the women salespeople had limited access to both formal and informal information networks. Schul and Wren (1992), 14 years after the Busch and Bush study, found no significant differences in role ambiguity between female and male salespeople. In view of the significant proportion of women in sales organizations today compared to the time when the Busch and Bush research was conducted, coupled with the recent findings, we also expect to find no differences in role ambiguity based on gender.

H1: Female and male salespeople in a gender-balanced sales organization experience similar degrees of role ambiguity.

Although there are research findings in the marketing literature concerning role conflict differences by gender, the prevailing assumption is that women should experience more role conflict than their male counterparts. However, Schul and Wren (1992) found no gender difference for role conflict and Siguaw and Honeycutt (1995) found only slight differences. Schul and Wren suggest that differences found in earlier studies may not be present today. Accordingly, because of the logic of this premise, we expect to find no difference in gender based on role conflict.

H2: Female salespeople in a gender-balanced sales organization will not experience greater degrees of role conflict than their male counterparts.

**Burnout and Job Stress**

Burnout is defined as a “unique type of stress syndrome, characterized by emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and diminished personal accomplishment” (Cordes and Dougherty, 1993, p. 621). The primary research attention on burnout has been centered on positions in nursing, education, and social work. Burnout is potentially important in explaining sales force behavior and attitudes (Singh, Goolsby, and Rhoades, 1994).

Understanding job stress is a major concern in the sales organization because it has been shown to play a role in a number of key job-related attitudes (organizational commitment, job satisfaction) and behaviors (turnover) (Sager, 1994; Selye, 1980). Goolsby (1992) includes conflict, role stress, withdrawal, job satisfaction, and organizational commitment in a role stress model. Stress can lead to physical illnesses and chronic diseases, such as heart disease, mental health, depression (Eckles, 1987), or other problems such as drug abuse.

While not included in prior gender research in sales organizations, burnout and job stress appear relevant in investigating gender differences. Babakus et al. (1996) found that stress is closely related to role ambiguity and conflict. Consistent with our hypotheses for role ambiguity and conflict, we do not expect to find differences for burnout and job stress based on gender.

H3: Female salespeople in a gender-balanced sales organization will not experience greater degrees of burnout and job stress than their male counterparts.

**Job Satisfaction**

The job satisfaction construct has received a considerable amount of research attention in seeking to understand employee attitudes and behaviors. Interest has been particularly high in sales research because salesperson job satisfaction has been found related to several important job-related attitudes (organizational commitment) and behaviors (turnover intentions) (Johnston et al., 1990; Behrmann and Perreault, 1984).

Previous studies have indicated that women experience lower job satisfaction than their male peers (Busch and Bush, 1978; Swan, Futrell, and Todd, 1978). Women were believed to possess less satisfaction in the workplace because of harassment and discrimination issues (Schul and Wren, 1992). However, the sales job has undergone transformations in the past decade which incorporates a heavier emphasis on relationships selling (Churchill, Ford, and Walker, 1996). O’Leary (1974) suggests that personality and socialization practices associated with women are making women more compatible with the sales job. In addition, Fugate, Decker, and Brewer (1988) argue that as the sales force has become more fully integrated, the negative consequences of tokenism may have been reduced and thus, women are more satisfied with the job. As a result, it should not be overly surprising that neither Schul and Wren (1992) nor Siguaw and Honeycutt (1995) found significant differences in job satisfaction between male and female salespeople. We expect to find similar results based on job satisfaction.
**H4:** Female salespeople in a gender-balanced sales organization will not experience greater degrees of dissatisfaction than their male counterparts.

**Organizational Commitment**

Organizational commitment reflects the strength of the salesperson's involvement and loyalty to the organization (Porter, Steers, Mowday, and Boulian, 1974). There is little recent research support that organizational commitment varies based on gender. Neither Schul and Wren (1992) nor Siguaw and Honeycutt (1995) found gender differences concerning organizational commitment. They observe that as the playing field has become more even for the genders, the commitment to the organization has increased for the female sales force. Of course, organizational commitment may vary by industry and the proportion of women in the sales force. For example, a sales organization with a small percentage of female salespeople might result in lower relative organizational commitment by women. Nonetheless, the research supporting no differences leads us to expect that there are no differences in organizational commitment based on gender.

**H5:** Female salespeople in a gender-balanced sales organization will not experience lower levels of organizational commitment than their male counterparts.

**Met Expectations**

The construct met expectations considers how the salesperson's actual job experience compared to expectations at the time of employment, whereas, the job satisfaction construct considers the salesperson's feeling toward the on-going job. We would expect the two constructs to be positively related although capturing different aspects of the salesperson's views toward the job. Satisfaction gets at the salesperson's present feelings about the job, which may range from favorable to unfavorable. Met expectations considers whether the job turned out as expected. Importantly, it is not unusual for a person's job experience to be different from expectations, yet not necessarily unfavorable. Thus, the expectations construct captures an important aspect of the salesperson's view of the job. While there is no known empirical study of this construct, a scale has been developed (Griffith, Hair, Johnston, 1994). Following our logic for organizational commitment, there should be no difference in met expectations based on gender.

**H6:** Female salespeople in a gender-balanced sales organization will not experience different levels of met expectations than their male counterparts.

**Intention to Leave**

There is strong conceptual and empirical support for the intention to leave construct. When competent people leave the organization, it is difficult, if not impossible, to immediately prevent gaps in sales force performance. The salesperson's sales are difficult to sustain (in the short run) and the costs of recruiting and training a replacement increase operating expenses. A substantial body of research indicates that low job satisfaction and low organizational commitment increase the propensity to leave (Netemeyer, Johnston, and Burton, 1990; Sager, 1994).

Studies have shown a higher intention to leave among females compared to their male colleagues. Beside the reasons to leave an organization that are common to both genders, women are more likely to leave because of pregnancy, family problems, child rearing, and job discrimination (Chusmir, 1982; Nelson and Quick, 1985). Schul and Wren (1992) found that female salespeople do experience higher rates of turnover than do their male counterparts. In the absence of a compelling counter argument, we hypothesize that women will have a higher propensity to leave the organization.

**H7:** Female salespeople in a gender-balanced sales organization will experience greater intention to leave the organization compared to their male counterparts.

**Compensation and Performance**

Compensation has consistently been shown to have a significant influence on a salesperson's feeling about the organization and the job itself in academic research and management practice (Churchill, Ford, and Walker, 1979; Ingram and LaForge, 1992). Similarly, the performance construct has received extensive attention in sales research. Our conceptualization of salesperson performance considers both outcome and behavioral components of performance (Behrman and Perreault, 1984; Anderson and Oliver, 1987; Cravens et al., 1993). The potential effects of gender are likely to be present regarding compensation and performance. Schul and Wren (1992) found a significant difference in performance between male and female salespeople. Although not included in prior gender research, there is substantial published data indicating lower pay for women in comparable jobs. This would suggest that women might have a less positive perception about their compensation compared to men. Therefore, we expect differences based on gender for compensation and performance.

**H8:** Female salespeople in a gender-balanced sales organization will experience differing levels of compensation and performance compared to their male counterparts.

**Family Relationships**

There are no known research findings examining family, marriage, and child relationship differences in sales organizations based on gender. However, these areas seem particularly relevant given the historical role of women in these relationships. If gender differences occur, they would likely be present concerning these relationships. We hypothesize differences based on gender for family, marriage, and child relationships.

**H9:** Female salespeople in a gender-balanced sales organization will display differences in family relationships compared to their male counterparts.
The gender difference issue centers on two important questions: First, are differences influenced by the customer and/or sales force gender mix? Second, what variables are most likely to display differences based on gender? We examine these questions in an empirical study involving a large sales force that has a balanced sales force gender mix and a relatively high female mix in the customer base.

Research Design

Sample

The company that served as the research site for the study is a large international services organization. The sales force sampled in this study is located throughout the United States. Their customer base is also located throughout the United States. This company also has an international sales force which was not included in the study.

Salespeople call on business-to-business customers that market the services to consumer and organizational end-users and salespeople are evaluated based on the revenues for the company’s services and other outcomes generated by each salesperson’s assigned accounts. The field sales force represented in the study is compensated on the basis of salary plus commissions (commission payments comprise about 25% of total compensation).

Data were collected using a mail questionnaire. The questionnaire was mailed to each salesperson in the organization with letters from the chief sales executive and the research team. The questionnaire was returned directly to the researchers. The questionnaire was developed and pretested in personal interviews with company sales executives and 25 salespeople.

A total of 203 completed questionnaires were obtained from the sales force of 350 people. This was a response rate of 58%. There were 186 complete responses on all of the questions, yielding a usable response rate of 53%. Comparisons of demographic characteristics to the characteristics in the sample indicated no apparent nonresponse bias. The gender mix was 100 males (56%) and 86 females (44%).

Measures, Reliability, and Validity

Role ambiguity and role conflict have been widely used in studies for over 20 years (Churchill, Ford, and Walker, 1979). Role ambiguity and conflict were measured using the Rizzo, House, and Litzman (1970) 6- and 8-item scales, respectively, acknowledging that there has been some criticism in the use of the Rizzo, House, and Litzman (1970) role ambiguity and conflict scales (Singh and Rhoades, 1991; King and King, 1990). This scale enabled us to compare the study findings with other related studies. The respondent was asked to indicate the frequency of encountering the situation described in each item (Table 2), using a scale anchored by “always” (5) and “never” (1). The reliability coefficient was 0.77 for role ambiguity and 0.70 for conflict.

Job stress was measured on a 7-item scale (Churchill, Ford, and Walker, 1974) using a 1–7 strongly agree/strongly disagree scale. The reliability coefficient was 0.83 for job stress.

Job satisfaction was measured using 28 items anchored by a 1–7 strongly agree/strongly disagree scale. This scale has been used in prior sales research. The reliability coefficient was 0.89 for job satisfaction. Organizational commitment has been found to have a positive relationship with job satisfaction (Johnston et al., 1990). Organizational commitment was measured using a 9-item scale with a reliability coefficient of 0.84.

Met expectations was measured using a 44-item scale which asks the respondent to compare her/his actual work experiences with his/her expectations about the job. The scale is anchored by “much better” (5) to “much worse” (1). The reliability coefficient for met expectations was 0.95.

Propensity to leave was measured using a 4-item scale developed by Bluedorn (1982) and used frequently in sales force research (Johnston et al., 1990). The scale assesses the respondent’s chances of quitting the job during the next three months, six months, next year, and next two years was anchored by “very high” (7) and “very low” (1). The reliability coefficient was 0.84.

Compensation was measured using a 7-item scale based on the major compensation factors identified by management in the study firm. The respondent was asked to indicate the level of agreement using a 5-point scale anchored by “strongly agree” (5) and “strongly disagree” (1). This scale seeks to obtain the salesperson’s extent of agreement on the fairness of the incentive program, the proportion of total compensation accounted for by base salary and incentive pay, and the basis of determination of incentive pay. The reliability coefficient was 0.70 for compensation.

Performance was measured using a 6-item scale. The scale was adapted from the Behrman and Perreault (1984) scale developed to provide self-ratings of performance. Self-ratings have been found to be highly correlated with sales manager ratings of salesperson performance (Churchill, Ford, Hartley, and Walker, 1985). The scale includes behavior and outcome performance items: building effective relations with customers, making effective presentations to customers and prospects, achieving annual sales targets and other objectives, understanding our services and their applications, providing feedback to management, and understanding customer needs and work processes. The 7-point scale was anchored by “outstanding” (7) and “need improvement” (1). The reliability coefficient for performance was 0.80.

Burnout was measured using a 22-item scale based on Maslach and Jackson (1981). The 5-point scale was anchored by “strongly agree” (5) and “strongly disagree” (1). The reliability coefficient was 0.87. Family, child, and marriage relationships were measured using 8-, 4-, and 4-item scales, respectively. Each 5-point scale was anchored by “strong positive impact” (5) and “strong negative impact” (1). The reliability coefficients were 0.85, 0.90, and 0.90, respectively.

While most of our measures have been shown to be viable in previous studies, they were, nevertheless, subjected to con-
Table 2. Measures and Item Examples

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Construct</th>
<th>Items</th>
<th>Scale</th>
<th>Range</th>
<th>Example</th>
<th>Source</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Role ambiguity</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1–5</td>
<td></td>
<td>“I know what my responsibilities are.”</td>
<td>Rizzo, House, and Lirtzman (1970)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Role conflict</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>1–5</td>
<td></td>
<td>“I receive conflicting requests from two or more people.”</td>
<td>Rizzo, House, and Lirtzman (1970)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Burnout</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>1–5</td>
<td></td>
<td>“I feel emotionally drained from my work.”</td>
<td>Maslach and Jackson (1981)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organizational commitment</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>1–7</td>
<td></td>
<td>“I am willing to put in a great deal of effort beyond that normally</td>
<td>Porter, Steers, Boulian, and Mowday (1977)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Met expectations</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>1–5</td>
<td></td>
<td>“Feeling what I do is important.”</td>
<td>Griffith, Roger, Hair, Joe F., and John-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intention to leave</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1–7</td>
<td></td>
<td>“Propensity to leave in the next three to four months.”</td>
<td>Ston, Mark W.: working paper (1994).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sales compensation</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1–5</td>
<td></td>
<td>“The commission pay program has caused me to improve the way I do my</td>
<td>New scale</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family relationship</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>1–5</td>
<td></td>
<td>Your mental and physical state at home.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marriage relationship</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1–5</td>
<td></td>
<td>Your relationship with spouse.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child relationship</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1–5</td>
<td></td>
<td>Time available for your children.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Firmatory factor analysis to assess their unidimensionality as recommended by Anderson and Gerbing (1988). Due to sample size restrictions with the number of measures included in the test, separate analyses were performed for subsets of the constructs, thus providing a conservative test of unidimensionality. Confirmatory analysis was also used to assess the discriminant validity of the measures and to assess the level of cross correlation of individual measures of each scale. Confirmatory factor analysis of each of the subsets of dimensions resulted in acceptable levels of fit and significant loadings of all hypothesized measures on their respective dimensions.

A series of pair-wise confirmatory factor analyses was conducted to assess discriminant validity of the measures using chi-square tests (Anderson and Gerbing, 1988). Results of the analyses showed that intention to leave did demonstrate discriminant validity from each of the dimensions. Individual measures that displayed acceptable reliability and validity for the dimensions were combined into scales by taking the arithmetic mean of the items measuring each dimension.

Research Results

Gender Differences

As discussed earlier, our research site falls into the gender-balanced zone of Figure 1. In this situation we would expect few differences based on sales force gender. Schul and Wren (1992) used ANOVA to examine gender differences for their sample and formed only three significant differences for the nine hypotheses tested [role conflict, job satisfaction (supervision), and performance]. As a replication of their analysis we conducted an ANOVA but found no significant differences based on gender. These findings provide further support that gender differences may not be present in some sales forces today. Of course, the Schul and Wren (1992) and our study were conducted in only two organizations, so further research support is needed to more fully examine the research question.

We also conducted t-tests of differences for the measures of each construct between the male and female subsamples (see Table 3). Significant differences (0.05 or better) were found only for role conflict (0.01), met expectations (0.04), and intention to leave (0.05). Interestingly, the female sample results indicated more favorable differences, (e.g., propensity to leave significantly lower, met expectations higher, and role conflict lower) compared to their male counterparts.

Comparison with Prior Research

Table 4 compares our gender results with the Schul and Wren (1992) and the Siguaw and Honeycutt (1995) findings. The gender analysis results of our study coupled with the two research teams’ findings suggest a potentially important managerial and research point—gender differences in sales organizations where women are a substantial portion of the sales force may be less applicable than previously thought based on the gender research of the 1970s and 1980s. The studies point to far more similarities than differences in salespeople based on gender. In addition, some of the differences that we found were in the opposite direction compared to older gender studies.

Discussion and Conclusions

Our objective is to provide insight to the contradictory findings over the past two decades concerning the differences in attitudes and behavior for male and female sales personnel.
Our findings provide further support, contrary to traditional wisdom, that there are more similarities than differences between men and women in the sales force. Schul and Wren (1992) point to possible changes that may be occurring in the historical perspective concerning gender differences in the workplace. They suggest that gender differences found in previous studies may have been reduced or eliminated altogether. Interestingly, the prior research suggests that women may be more likely to leave an organization and be less positive concerning the organization and the job. We found women less likely to leave the organization in our study. One possible explanation is that the percentage of women in the sales force and the gender mix of the customer base may be potentially important factors mitigating the gender issue.

**Does Gender Really Matter?**

We believe that the 'gender' variable may be skewed where the sales organization or customer base is skewed toward one gender or the other, thus fitting into Quadrants 1 and 3 of the customer-sales force gender classification grid (Figure 1). Five studies are located inside the gender-balanced portion of the model including: Gibson and Swan (1981), Brief and Oliver (1976), Russ and McNeilly (1995), Schul and Wren (1992), and our study. Two of the studies Brief and Oliver (1976) and Gibson and Swan (1981) are over 15 years old. Brief and Oliver sampled retail salespeople and found little differences in the genders. Gibson and Swan sampled real estate sales personnel and also found little differences. Retail and real estate have been heavily populated by female sales reps and customers for quite a while, and thus may explain the lack of differences found among the sales respondents.

The more current studies found in the gender-balanced section display only slight differences in the genders. Schul and Wren (1992), Russ and McNeilly (1995), and our study found significant differences in turnover intention but little else. The industries represented in these studies have not "traditionally" been female balanced. Rather, in the last decade the sales forces have become more balanced and thus fewer

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Chi-square</th>
<th>Significance</th>
<th>Level of Significance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>M</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>F</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organizational commitment</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>5.42</td>
<td>5.61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Job satisfaction</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>4.45</td>
<td>4.58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Role conflict</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>3.14</td>
<td>3.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Role ambiguity</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>3.82</td>
<td>3.92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Met expectations</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>3.03</td>
<td>3.17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family relationship</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>2.83</td>
<td>2.93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Married relationship</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>2.57</td>
<td>2.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child relationship</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>2.43</td>
<td>2.53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Burnout</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>3.60</td>
<td>3.65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sales compensation</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>2.52</td>
<td>2.47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Performance</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>5.81</td>
<td>5.65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intention to leave</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>2.38</td>
<td>1.99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Job stress</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>4.01</td>
<td>4.08</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Two-tailed probability.

---

**Table 3. T-Test Results by Gender**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Role ambiguity</td>
<td>No difference</td>
<td>Supported</td>
<td>No difference</td>
<td>Differences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Role conflict</td>
<td>No difference</td>
<td>Significant a</td>
<td>No difference b</td>
<td>Marginal difference</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Job stress</td>
<td>No difference</td>
<td>Supported</td>
<td>NA a</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Job satisfaction</td>
<td>No difference</td>
<td>Supported</td>
<td>No difference</td>
<td>No difference</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Met expectations</td>
<td>No difference</td>
<td>Significant a</td>
<td>NA a</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organizational commitment</td>
<td>No difference</td>
<td>Supported</td>
<td>No difference</td>
<td>No difference</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Propensity to leave</td>
<td>Women have higher propensity to leave</td>
<td>Supported</td>
<td>Women have higher propensity to leave</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Performance</td>
<td>No difference</td>
<td>Supported</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>No difference</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

a Female differences more favorable.
b Difference for supervisors but not for pay, task, or autonomy. a Not tested.
differences have emerged. For example, the Schul and Wren (1992) study examined pharmaceutical reps and found few differences. In contrast, two 1978 studies (Busch and Bush, and Swan, Futrell, and Todd) also studied pharmaceutical sales forces and found significant differences on several variables, a reversal of results 14 years later. A strong argument can be made for the gender balance as an explanation for the differences in the results. Busch and Bush (1978) argue, “one possible explanation for the differences found is that the female sales representative in this study is operating in a male dominated industry.” Swan, Futrell, and Todd (1978) argue that some of the differences found in their study may be due to “women who are ‘pioneering’ the entrance of females into traditional ‘male occupations’.”

The mix in our study, however, was fairly evenly split (56% men, 44% women). While we did not find gender to be significant for most of the organizational variables, the significant differences found for three of the constructs do offer a different view of how women perceive the work environment.

In Table 4, we compare Schul and Wren (1992), which fell in the gender-balanced circle, Siguaw and Honeycutt (1995), which fell outside the gender-balanced circle, and our study. There are very few differences in the variables studied. Siguaw and Honeycutt found significant differences in role ambiguity while the other two studies did not. They also found marginal differences in role conflict when the other two did not. All other results were the same except the direction of difference with propensity to leave. Schul and Wren found women to have a higher propensity to leave and our study found a lower propensity to leave the organization among women.

We examined several variables included in other gender difference studies of sales forces. None was found to be significantly different across genders. There is clearly mounting evidence for the premise that gender doesn’t matter in many sales organizations. Importantly, these findings seem to be consistent even when the gender mix is not balanced as shown in the Siguaw and Honeycutt (1995) research.

Management Implications

The accumulated evidence provides support for the position that sales management should not proactively follow different management guidelines for male and female salespeople. Nonetheless, there are continuing concerns voiced about pay imbalances and difficulties of women moving into upper-level management positions. Responsiveness to these issues is likely to become increasingly essential in many sales organizations.

One potentially important factor in explaining gender differences may be the percentage of women managers in an organization. The management penetration by women was about 27% in the organization we studied, which is near the average of 26% for 200 large companies in 1992 (Sharpe, 1994). These data are for management positions across all business functions. Women managers in several large manu-

facturers account for less than 10% of total managers. This same study observes that female management gains are impeded by corporate cultures dominated by males.

While the academic research evidence highlights few differences in salespeople based on gender, it would be naive to suggest that there are no problems or challenges. One recent study conducted by a New York women’s research and advocacy group studied salespeople in 21 companies (Shellenberg, 1995). The results indicate that bias lingers in business-to-business sales organizations. The issues identified in the study include pay gaps, difficulty in entertaining customers, sexual harassment by customers, and pessimism concerning advancement opportunities. These issues promise to be increasingly important sales management concerns. The trend toward team selling may reduce the problem of harassment by customers.

Research Directions

The need for further examination of gender differences in sales organizations is highlighted by our findings coupled with other recent academic research. The results generally contradict the gender difference research findings of the 1970s and 1980s, suggesting that in the contemporary environment, historical premises about gender differences may not be correct. Two important implications are suggested: (1) gender appears to be a much less important sales management concern than indicated in previous research; and (2) the few gender differences that do exist may be opposite to the direction hypothesized. It is important to note that women comprise a substantial portion of the management structure and overall work force in the organization used in this study. Such an organizational environment may influence gender differences in the directions found in our study and serve to reinforce a conclusion of Schul and Wren (1992) that the role of women is changing in industrial selling.

Because of the criticisms of the Rizzo, House, and Lirtzman (1990) role ambiguity and conflict scales, future studies incorporating these constructs is sales force studies may wish to consider newer construct measures such as the Singh and Rhoades (1991) role ambiguity scale. The ambiguity construct has received more measurement criticisms than other role concepts.

References


