

Should We Treat All Boundary Spanners Equally?: Examining Gender and Marital Status Differences Among Isolation and Role Conflict

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Abstract

Boundary spanning employees perform a critical role in the organization (Behrman & Perreault 1984; Jolson et al 1993; Singh 1993). A boundary spanning employee is any employee in an organization who “engages in job-related interactions with a person who is considered part of the environment, who is not a member of the organization” (Robertson 1995, p. 75). Boundary spanning employees include salespeople as well as any frontline or customer-contact employee such as customer service representatives, service technicians, retail employees, delivery personnel, and professional buyers (e.g. McNeilly & Russ 1992; Russ et al 1998; Singh, Verbeke & Rhoads 1996).

While there have been a number of studies conducted to better understand boundary spanners (e.g. Bagozzi 1978, 1980; Behrman & Perreault 1984; Boles & Babin 1996; Churchill, Ford & Walker 1976; Riggle, Edmondson & Hansen 2009; Edmondson & Boyer 2013), limited to no research exists that has empirically investigated the extent to which boundary spanning employees differ. Rather it is presumed that all boundary spanners are comparable because of the role they play in the organization. This study investigates the possibility that there are differences based on gender and marital status.

Specifically, this study explores the differences between males and females, as well as single and married individuals as it relates to isolation and role conflict and their relationship with organizational support, supervisory support and emotional exhaustion and ultimately organizational commitment. In doing so, this research (1) builds on the body of knowledge about boundary spanners, (2) contributes to the sales management literature by being among the first to investigate differences among groups carrying out boundary spanner roles, and (3) extends the sales management literature by examining how front line employee activities influence stakeholders (in this case the boundary spanners) other than customers.

The study addresses its research objectives via a field survey of a wide variety of boundary spanner employees. The measures were taken from existing literature. Each exhibited acceptable reliabilities (α 's ranged from .759 - .949) and additionally they were deemed unidimensional. The results of the field survey were analyzed using PLS-SEM. A multi-group analysis was conducted to determine if there are significant differences among males and females, as well as married and singles. Therefore, four groups were examined: single females (N=373), married females (N=291), single males (N=162), and married males (N=228).

The Welch-Satterthwaite test indicated eight significant differences with a p-value of .01 and below. Additionally, there are five other significant differences with a p-value of .05 and below. The results for the relationship between role conflict and emotional exhaustion indicate the greatest differences among the groups. Role conflict induces more emotional exhaustion for the married males and females than for their single counterparts. The other two relationships with multiple significant differences are between isolation and organizational support as well as isolation and emotional exhaustion. The relationship between isolation and organizational support shows a positive relationship for all groups; however, the relationship was significantly higher for married males and females. It is believed that for the married individual, the isolation allows the married individuals a lot of flexibility to do their job and maintain their personal life, thus a feeling of support from the organization. For the single person, the same behavior may feel like freedom, but as a benefit, it may not be as valuable to them and therefore not as strong of a relationship. The relationship between isolation and emotional exhaustion is a negative relationship for all but single females in which it is slightly positive. The negative relationship is much stronger for single males, followed by married males, then married females. For this relationship there appears to be a gender difference. The isolation seems to reduce levels of stress and emotional exhaustion in males to a much greater extent than to females.

Based on these findings, managers of boundary spanners should make adjustments for their boundary spanners based on their gender and marital status. In doing so, they will be able to reduce emotional exhaustion and increase levels of organizational support.

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Relevance to Marketing Educators, Researchers and Practitioners: This study indicates that there are differences in boundary spanners based on gender and marital status. Therefore, in order to maximize the capacity of their sales force, sales managers should make adjustments to their management style based on the gender and marital status of the sales person.

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