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Joint impact of ethical climate and external work locus of control on job meaningfulness

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ABSTRACT

Researchers prescribe that the combined influence of personal characteristics and work conditions should be examined to provide a clearer understanding of predictors of performance. This study investigates the joint impact of salespeople's external work locus of control (WLOC) and a firm's ethical climate on job meaningfulness, job performance and turnover intentions. The study hypotheses were tested with a sample of 151 business-to-business salespeople from a sales organization based in the southeastern United States. The results of the study suggest that when salespeople perceive that their sales organization has a strong ethical climate, the negative impact of external WLOC is mitigated based on the salesperson's feelings of job meaningfulness, resulting in positive job performance and fewer turnover intentions. Implications, limitations and suggestions for future research are provided.

1. Introduction

Sales managers are most concerned with the job performance and retention of their salesforce. This concern is understandable, since U.S. firms annually spend an estimated \$15 billion in training salespeople for better performance. This investment in training becomes questionable when industry estimates place the turnover of U.S. salespeople at approximately 27%, which is two times that of the overall labor force (Harvard Business Review, 2017). The interest in identifying predictors of performance and turnover intentions has led to numerous studies (Schrock, Hughes, Fu, Richards, & Jones, 2016). Early meta-analyses found that skill, situational factors, personal factors, and aptitude are some of the important predictors of salesperson performance (Churchill, Ford, Hartley, & Walker, 1985; Vinchur, Schippmann, Switzer, & Roth, 1998). The Vinchur et al. (1998) meta-analysis assessed the impact of the Big Five personality dimensions and found that two of the dimensions, namely, extraversion and conscientiousness, were critical predictors of job performance. Recently, researchers noted that to obtain a better understanding of work outputs and their predictors, the joint influence of personal dispositions and work situations must be considered (Barrick, Mount, & Li, 2013). In one study, the authors state, “it is difficult to think of an instance of employee behavior that cannot be better understood by considering the joint influence of these two sets of factors” (Barrick et al., 2013, p. 133).

The WLOC¹ is a personality variable and has been studied extensively in the psychology and organizational research. Judge and Bono's (2001) meta-analysis showed that the four factors of core self-evaluations—namely, self-esteem, WLOC, neuroticism, and generalized self-efficacy—were predictors of both job satisfaction and job performance. Judge and Bono (2001) called for future research using at least one of the traits from the model of work outcomes. A quick review of the studies in the last ten years indicated that the internal WLOC garnered greater focus compared to the external locus (see Appendix B). The findings showed that the individuals' internal locus of control was associated with greater participation and higher motivation in service delivery (Hu, Parsa, Chen, & Hu, 2016), higher ethical climate perceptions (Domino, Wingreen, & Blanton, 2015) and greater job satisfaction (Tillman, Smith, & Tillman, 2010). Individuals with high internal locus of control were also shown to be proactive, innovative and had higher entrepreneurial skills (Chan, Lee, & Chen, 2016) but showed their dissatisfaction when the external rewards were not commensurate with the performance (Kampkötter, 2017). Several of the researchers studied the external locus of control and found that it has a positive impact on an employee's emotional exhaustion (Hamwi, Rutherford, Boles, & Madupalli, 2014), as well as the increased perception of work interfering with personal life (Karkoulian, Srour, & Sinan, 2016). Hamwi et al. (2014) note the paucity of research on the external locus of control compared to other organizational behavior constructs and

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especially highlight the importance of studying the external locus of control in sales settings. These researchers suggest that the importance of studying the locus of control is due to the unique boundary spanning sales role. Additionally, it has been noted that an external locus of control is more prominent in certain countries and generations, which suggests the need for additional exploration (Spector, Cooper, Sanchez, O'Driscoll, & Sparks, 2002; Twenge, Campbell, Hoffman, & Lance, 2010).

The primary objective of this research is to understand how the WLOC, i.e., control beliefs in the workplace, influences the job performance and turnover intentions of salespeople (Spector, 1988). Most organizational researchers believe that personality variables are especially good predictors of work-related outcomes (Ashton, 1998; Barrick & Mount, 1991; Judge, Heller, & Mount, 2002; Spector, Dwyer, & Jex, 1988; Spector & O'Connell, 1994). There is an abundance of studies on performance and turnover, but to the best of our knowledge, few have focused on the salesperson's WLOC and its influence on these two outcome variables. Sager, Strutton, and Johnson (2006) presented a series of propositions to test the influence of locus of control on salesperson performance and advocated for additional research on locus of control with relative environmental and situational factors in sales settings. Bowling's (2007) meta-analysis of job performance showed that only five studies examined WLOC and job performance relationships, while meta-analysis of safety performance by Christian, Wallace, Bradley, and Burke (2009) included nine studies with WLOC. Christian et al.'s (2009) meta-analysis also called for research to see how personal and situational factors interact to influence performance.

The ethical climate represents a work situation that denotes the moral atmosphere and the level of ethics practiced within a company. The ethical climate and its influence on sales and marketing practices and outcomes is another factor that has been a subject of numerous studies (DeConinck, 2011; Gabler, Nagy, & Hill, 2014; Jaramillo, Mulki, & Solomon, 2006; Kleiser, Sivadas, Kellaris, & Dahlstrom, 2003; Schmalz & Orth, 2012; Weeks, Loe, Chonko, Martinez, & Wakefield, 2006). Forte (2004) posits that the ethical climate has a significant impact on the behavioral decisions of individual employees. The rule-based ethical climate in an organization provides benchmarks and guidance for correct actions and employee obligations to the organization (Cherry & Fraedrich, 2000). Jaramillo, Mulki, and Boles (2013) state that the ethical climate can act as a reminder to salespeople to do the right thing regarding their value system and goals. However, to our knowledge, only a few empirical studies, including those in the sales literature, have explored the joint impact of ethical climate and locus of control on predictors of job performance and turnover intentions.

This study contributes to these calls for research. The study postulates that the ethical climate, an organizational variable, is a factor that moderates the relationship between external WLOC, a personality variable, and the salesperson's feelings that his/her job is meaningful, a predictor of job performance. Specifically studying a core trait's influence on salespeople's attitudes and behaviors and identifying ways to manage salespeople that are high on this trait contributes to the existing knowledge base in the sales literature. This approach also provides useful ideas for practicing sales managers in leading a diverse salesforce. The results of this study, which show the ethical climate's ability to mitigate the influence of WLOC on job performance and turnover intentions, can benefit sales managers.

The findings of this study are particularly important for firms in developed markets, such as the U.S., as well as in emerging economies. As markets become global, professional selling is gaining importance in the emerging markets, where personality variables and values are different than those in the advanced countries. Studies in the early 2000s comparing employee WLOC showed significant differences among countries (Spector et al., 2002; Spector, Sanchez, Siu, Salgado, & Ma, 2004). Employees in the U.S. indicated having higher internal WLOC compared to employees in an emerging economy, such as the People's Republic of China, where U.S. companies have a strong presence.

Employees in China reported higher levels of external WLOC (Spector et al., 2002; Spector et al., 2004). This can be a problem in developed countries such as the USA as well since an increasing proportion of millennials are entering the workforce in recent years and Twenge, Zhang, and Im (2004) propose that millennials have higher external WLOC compared to their counterparts in earlier generations. Managers need to understand that this shift in perspective will influence millennial employees' attitudes and behaviors in the workplace.

In the next several pages, this study lays out the theoretical background and hypotheses followed by the methodology used for data collection and analysis to support the stated hypotheses. The managerial implications of the findings, limitations and future research directions are also provided.

2. Literature review

2.1. Conceptual background

Walker, Churchill, and Ford's (1977) study and Churchill et al.'s (1985) meta-analysis showed that a salesperson's personal factors and organizational (situational) factors are determinants of sales performance. Campbell, McCloy, Oppler, and Sager's (1993) theory of performance postulates that individual performance is determined by proximal factors such as knowledge, skill, and motivations to perform. These proximal constructs are in turn influenced by distal determinants of performance, such as individual personality and the organizational climate. In their meta-analytic review of the role of personal and situational factors of the workplace in predicting safety performance, Christian et al. (2009) used such factors as neuroticism and locus of control as personality characteristics and situation-related constructs, such as safety climate and Human Resource Management practices, as part of the distal constructs (Christian et al., 2009). These researchers found support for the rationale that both individual-based factors and situational-based factors are important predictors of safety performance. In the current study, WLOC (a core trait) and the organization's ethical climate perceptions (situational factor) influence a proximal construct – job meaningfulness – that motivates salespeople to perform better and discourages turnover intentions, which are two of the most important variables in the sales field.

Locus of control is one of the four factors of the core self-evaluations construct (Judge & Bono, 2001). It is a personality variable and reflects an individual's belief that rewards and outcomes in life are controlled either by one's own actions or by other forces (Spector, 1988). The CSE² theory states that an employee's self-appraisal and perceptions of their own abilities influences their attitudes and behaviors at the workplace (Judge, Locke, Durham, & Kluger, 1998). This is in line with the earlier self-consistency theory, which hypothesizes that individuals are motivated to behave in a manner consistent with their self-image, suggesting that individuals with high self-esteem will perform effectively to maintain their positive self-image (Korman, 1970).

Spector (1988) who developed a WLOC measure did a qualitative review of the literature to show that employees with high internal WLOC demonstrate higher leadership skills, motivation, satisfaction and performance. Judge and Bono's (2001) meta-analysis showed mean correlations of 0.32 and 0.22 of internal WLOC with job satisfaction and job performance, respectively. This suggests that for salespeople, a high internal WLOC is a positive personality variable, whereas an external WLOC is less desirable. Employees with high CSE, indicating high internal WLOC, believe that an outcome is a direct result of their ability, skill, and effort. Individuals with low CSE, indicating external WLOC, believe that luck, fate, or some unknown external force controls the outcome rather than their effort or ability (Spector, 1988; Spector et al., 2001). It could be a problem for sales organizations if they have

² Core self-evaluations.

salespeople who do not believe in the connection between effort and outcome (Sager et al., 2006) and attribute outcomes to fate or luck.

A limited number of sales studies explore the external attributions and behaviors associated with luck. Dixon and her colleagues (Dixon, Forbes, & Schertzer, 2005; Dixon, Spiro, & Forbes, 2003) explore how salespeople attribute luck as a reason for their sales performance successes or failures. More recently, Mayo and Mallin (2014) found a positive relationship between salespeople's belief in luck and their demonstration of superstitious sales behaviors. Those with an external WLOC believe in the randomness of outcomes and are less likely to see the relationship between their actions and outcomes (Johnson, Rosen, Chang, & Lin, 2015).

Luk et al. (2012) posit that those with an external WLOC believe that they are helpless to control the outcome, which may cause a lack of motivation to learn skills for self-growth. The theory of learned helplessness suggests that when individuals believe that outcomes are uncontrollable, they have lower expectancies of success and are more likely to be demoralized, which can lead to inaction and lack of interest (Abramson, Seligman, & Teasdale, 1978). Appendix B is a partial list of empirical studies that provide evidence of the relationship between WLOC and critical sales variables, such as job performance and job satisfaction.

The ethical climate, a situational variable, can be defined as the employees' perceptions of the work climate that sets guidelines for organizational procedures, policies, and practices with moral consequences (Martin & Cullen, 2006). The presence of strong ethical guidelines in organizations creates norms of behavior leading to a positive evaluation of the work environment because of its predictability and controllability (Jaramillo et al., 2013). This, in turn, can motivate employees to perform better (Erez & Judge, 2001). Clear behavioral guidelines provided by the organization help salespeople perceive a sense of structure in a world of uncertain outcomes. Forte (2004) posits that individuals perceiving a high ethical climate in an organization develop a belief in the connection between consequences and actions. Sales studies on ethics have shown how a strong ethical climate in an organization leads to positive results in terms of salespeople's attitudes and behaviors, organizational performance, reputation and customer goodwill (DeConinck, 2011; Fournier, Tanner, Chonko, & Manolis, 2010; Itani, Jaramillo, & Chonko, 2017; Valentine, Godkin, Fleischman, & Kidwell, 2011). Studies have also shown that when the organization is perceived as ethical, it motivates the salespeople to expend the effort needed for higher performance (Mulki, Jaramillo, & Locander, 2009).

3. Hypotheses

3.1. Ethical climate and job meaningfulness

Along with monetary benefits and work-life balance, a challenging job that provides opportunities to grow is a major attraction for the current generation of job seekers. Adams (2015) states that in the current market, "Professionals prefer jobs which are more helpful in their professional development than compensation (page 1)." Employees find a job meaningful if it enables them to pursue activities that truly matter to them, the work is considered important and valued by the firm, and the job enables them to reach their goals (Thakor & Joshi, 2005; Tyagi, 1985). When jobs are meaningful to employees, it can lead to positive outcomes, such as greater motivation, customer orientation, job satisfaction, and better job performance (Thakor & Joshi, 2005). A 2013 study about demanding customers by Jaramillo et al. (2013) provides evidence that when a salesperson's job is more challenging and meaningful, it leads to positive job outcomes – lower stress, better performance and lower turnover intentions.

A recent study of salespeople found a positive relationship between the ethical climate and job meaningfulness (Jaramillo et al., 2013). The presence of ethical guidelines, expectations, and consequences for violating organizational norms can provide employees with a sense of

purpose and clarity in their job, thus making the job attractive. When employees believe that the firm's actions and their jobs are driven by strong ethical guidelines, it may enhance the significance and meaningfulness of the task in their mind (Piccolo, Greenbaum, den Hartog, & Folger, 2010). Employees may perceive that the organizational values are in line with their own values, thereby making the job meaningful (Weeks, Loe, Chonko, & Wakefield, 2004). Studies have shown that the ethical climate influences the employee's attitudes (DeConinck, 2010). Since the presence of an ethical climate helps elevate the meaningfulness of a job by highlighting the purpose, morality, and ethicality of work (Piccolo et al., 2010), we propose the following replication hypothesis:

H1. A salesperson's perception of the firm's ethical climate is positively related to job meaningfulness.

3.2. External WLOC and job meaningfulness

Salespeople are motivated by both the extrinsic and intrinsic rewards of a job. While extrinsic rewards, such as salary, bonuses, and commission, are valued, salespeople also look for intrinsic rewards, such as value-laden tasks, opportunities to grow on the job, and doing work considered important by the firm (Jaramillo et al., 2013). Barrick et al. (2013) state that salespeople are motivated by jobs that allow them to use discretion in decision making, use diverse skills, and provide them with opportunities to grow. While those with internal WLOC, characterized by their high self-efficacy and self-confidence, welcome autonomy and decision making, those with external WLOC may find decision-making stressful because of their lack of confidence in the outcome. If those with external WLOC consider the desired job outcome as a chance occurrence beyond their control, they may find it difficult to accept that their effort or the work can make a meaningful impact. This is consistent with the Barrick et al.'s (2013) tenet that in order for motivation to lead to behaviors, employees should have the perception of control or have actual control over their goals. As per Korman's (1970) self-consistency theory, individuals have a higher inclination to behave in a manner that is consistent with their beliefs about their ability. The above leads to the following hypothesis:

H2. A salesperson's external WLOC is negatively related to job meaningfulness.

3.3. Job meaningfulness and job outcomes

A salesperson's ability to acquire and retain customer business contributes to the goals and objectives of the company. Successful job performance requires that salespeople understand customer needs and design solutions that best meet their short- and long-term needs. When salespeople perceive their job as meaningful and consistent with their values, they are motivated to go the extra mile to help customers and gain their business. A study of direct selling salespeople found job meaningfulness to be a strong predictor of job performance (Jaramillo et al., 2013). Based on this, we state the following hypothesis:

H3. Job meaningfulness is positively related to job performance.

Voluntary turnover of high performing salespeople is a major concern of sales managers, as their territories become vulnerable to competitors. Recent trade reports indicate that firms spend approximately \$15 billion a year in training expenses (Harvard Business Review., 2017). Turnover of good performers can also hurt sales. Positions may sit empty while companies recruit replacements and lose sales opportunities while new employees learn the ropes and build client relationships.

Studies have shown that when salespeople find their job meaningful and opportunities for growth are provided, they are unlikely to entertain thoughts of leaving the firm (Jaramillo et al., 2013). Successful

salespeople often leave not only because of lack of rewards and recognition but also when the job is less challenging and does not provide opportunities to grow. When a salesperson finds the job meaningful, interesting, and challenging, it leads to high internal work motivation and lowers turnover intentions. Therefore, we propose the following hypothesis:

H4. Job meaningfulness is negatively related to turnover intentions.

As mentioned earlier, turnover is bad for firms because of the lost sales, competitive moves and the associated cost of hiring and training salespeople. Recognizing turnover intentions becomes critical because it is the first step towards leaving the firm. By identifying turnover intentions, a sales manager could intervene to reduce voluntary turnover in his or her sales team. Zimmerman and Darnold (2009) state that the relationship between job performance and turnover is negative and cite four separate meta-analyses performed during the period from 1990 to 2000 that have validated this negative relationship. However, the studies of job performance and turnover intentions have been mixed, ranging from findings suggesting insignificant to highly significant relationships (Babakus, Cravens, Johnston, & Moncrief, 1999; Netemeyer, Brashear-Alejandro, & Boles, 2004).

A meta-analysis in 2009 showed that the correlation between job performance and turnover intentions was very small (effect size = 0.03) and positive (Zimmerman & Darnold, 2009). Salespeople may develop turnover intentions for a series of reasons. In addition to performance, other factors, such as the supervisor's behavior, organizational climate and work environment can trigger intentions to leave the organization. From a performance perspective, both low performers and high performers may harbor turnover intentions. Highly successful salespeople may think of leaving if their expectations of compensation and rewards are not met. Low performers may lose interest in the job when they cannot meet their goals and start looking for a job to avoid the shame of being fired by the organization. Given the mixed results, we state the following research hypothesis and recognize the possibility of an alternate result.

H5. Job performance is not related to a salesperson's turnover intentions.

3.4. Moderating influence of the ethical climate

In a recent study of the antecedents of ethical climate fit, Domino et al. (2015) showed that the interaction of personal factors (including one's locus of control) with environmental factors (the organization's ethical climate) influences outcomes. These researchers posit that individuals compare their personal factors to the prevailing organizational climate and are motivated to adopt behaviors to obtain a closer fit (Domino et al., 2015). In addition, an organization's ethical climate can provide structure by defining policies and procedures and setting behavioral expectations (DeConinck, 2010). Thus, the organizational ethical climate acts as a source of normative belief, prompting employees to rely on cues from coworkers and managers to guide their behavior (Victor & Cullen, 1988). Forte (2004) posits that individuals perceiving a high ethical climate in an organization develop a belief in the connection between consequences and actions. When the employees perceive their workplace environment as predictable and stable, it may strengthen the belief that the efforts spent will not be in vain and can lead to goal achievement (Erez & Judge, 2001; Kacmar, Collins, Harris, & Judge, 2009). Thus, an employee's perception of a strong ethical climate can create feelings of certainty about their activities and induce a sense of better control over the work environment (Johnson et al., 2015). In view of this, perceptions of a strong ethical climate by salespeople with external WLOC can mitigate their feelings of a lack of control and encourage positive behaviors. In this instance, the organization's ethical climate may act as a control to encourage the individual to align herself/himself with the attitudes and behaviors that benefit

the organization.

The moderating influence of an ethical climate is further supported by social exchange theory, which expounds on an employee's positive attitudes and behaviors as a reciprocal action. Several studies have shown that in organizations with a strong ethical climate, an individual's belief that the organization has a strong code of ethics is shown to lead to higher commitment to the organization (Cullen, Parboteeah, & Victor, 2003; DeConinck, 2010; DeConinck, 2011; Piccolo et al., 2010). Employees are likely to identify themselves with the organization and see their job as contributing meaningfully to their development. These employees also feel an obligation to make the firm successful and display customer-oriented behaviors (Piccolo et al., 2010; Schwepker & Ingram, 2016). This strong identification can act as the driving force to counteract the negative impact of external WLOC on job meaningfulness. Therefore, we state the following moderating hypotheses:

H6. A salesperson's perception of the existence of a strong ethical climate moderates the impact of external WLOC on job meaningfulness such that the negative impact is lower at higher ethical climate perceptions.

4. Methods

Two hundred fifty surveys were distributed to a business-to-business sales firm with offices in the southeastern United States after obtaining approval from senior management. Respondents were guaranteed anonymity of their responses. Approximately 60% of the salespeople responded over a period of two months. A total of 154 surveys were collected and 151 were coded for analysis after discarding three incomplete surveys. A majority (81%) of the respondents were male, reflecting the gender composition of the salesforce. The respondents' tenure with the firm ranged from less than one year to 41 years ($\mu = 6.9$, $\sigma = 7.4$) and total work experience ranged from one to 48 years ($\mu = 19.3$, $\sigma = 10.9$). The respondents ranged in age from 18 to 69 years ($\mu = 39.6$, $\sigma = 11.7$). The responses received during the first two weeks were compared with the responses from last two weeks, and no statistically significant differences were found for the constructs and the demographic questions in the survey (Armstrong & Overton, 1977).

4.1. Measures

All constructs were measured with previously used and validated scales from organizational and sales studies. Meaningful work was measured by using the seven items from the Work as Meaning Inventory (WAMI) scale developed by Steger, Dik, and Duffy (2012). Their research used the scale to measure employees' perceptions of work as a meaningful positive experience that is purpose oriented and contributes to personal growth. The salesperson's perceptions of an ethical climate were measured using five high loading items from Schwepker Jr.'s (2001) scale. Numerous studies on ethics have used the reduced measure to gauge the salesperson's assessment of the presence and enforcement of codes of ethics, corporate policies on ethics and top management actions related to ethics (Jaramillo et al., 2006; Schwepker Jr. & Hartline, 2005). To measure WLOC, we used the WLOC scale developed and used by Spector (1988) to assess an individuals' control beliefs in the work environment. This scale has been shown to predict work attitude and behavior more precisely than the general scales of locus of control. Four items were used in the study to represent the external WLOC from the eight-item short scale of WLOC (Spector, 1988). Job performance was assessed by using a "percent of goal achieved" question. The usage of percent goal achieved is consistent with a similar use by other sales researchers (Shannahan, Bush, & Shannahan, 2013) when actual performance data are not available. Turnover intention was measured using the Nadiri and Tanova (2010) three-item scale, which has shown high reliability and validity. Control

variables are variables that are related to the dependent variables and are included in the model to remove their effect from the regression equation. Use of control variables is a commonly used practice among researchers (Crant & Bateman, 2000; Kidwell, Hardesty, Murtha, & Sheng, 2011). Age, gender and work experience were used as control variables in this model since they are known to influence the attitudes and behaviors of salespersons (Barrick, Mount, & Strauss, 1994).

4.2. Measurement models, analysis and results

Prior to testing the model with the variables, multivariate normality was assessed by conducting a test for outliers and influencers and multi-collinearity. Cook's distance analysis was conducted and the scatter plot showed that there were two records that were somewhat different than others (Cook's D = 0.114 and Cook's D = 0.075) but less than the threshold of 1.0, indicating the lack of influence of these two records on the results. A test for multi-collinearity showed that the Variance Inflation Factors (VIF) were less than three, thus ruling out multi-collinearity.

A two-step process was used to validate the measures in the model. An exploratory factor analysis and item-to-total correlations were used to identify ill-fitting items and the factor structure (Anderson & Gerbing, 1988). To validate the properties of the latent variables, a confirmatory factor analysis with AMOS 23 was undertaken. The measurement model indicated adequate fit and a second confirmatory factor analysis was conducted after removing the low loading items from the measures used in the model. In this study, scale items with path coefficient values < 0.60 were removed. Removing low-loading and cross-loading items to increase the model fit is part of the scale validation and purification process and is an accepted practice in organizational research (Bhuiyan, Menguc, & Borsboom, 2005; Patterson et al., 2005). The results of the revised model showed the following adequate fit indices: $\chi^2 = 121,72$, $df = 84$, $p < .01$; Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA) = 0.055, $CI_{90\%} = 0.031$ to 0.075; CFI = 0.96; TLI = 0.96. The reliability indices as measured by Cronbach's alpha were above 0.70 for all the constructs used in the model (Anderson & Gerbing, 1988). Fornell and Larcker's (1981) method was used to test for the convergent validity. First, since all the indicator loadings were significant at $\alpha = 0.01$ and none of the 95% confidence intervals of the factor correlations included one convergent, validity was evident. In addition, as shown in the correlation matrix (Table 1), the average variance extracted values for the constructs in the model were above 0.50 and were higher than the squared correlations for all

pairs of factors. Appendix A shows the scale items and standardized loadings from the measurement model. The results of the correlation analysis and descriptive statistics are shown in Table 1.

The correlation analysis shows that external WLOC shows a statistically significant negative relationship with job meaningfulness and turnover intentions but not with ethical climate or job performance. Ethical climate shows a statistically significant positive relationship with job meaningfulness and a negative relationship with turnover intentions. Job meaningfulness is positively related to job performance and negatively related to turnover intentions. Among the demographic variables, only age shows a significant negative relationship with external WLOC, thus supporting the notion that the younger salespeople of this firm are more likely to hold external WLOC views.

To test the moderation impact by ethical climate, an interacting variable was created by multiplying the standardized values of WLOC and ethical climate. The reliabilities and measurement error for the interaction variable were estimated using the formula suggested by Ping (1995). SPSS AMOS 23 was used to run a structural equation model to test the relationships among the constructs, as shown in Fig. 1. The results of the structural model indicate an acceptable fit with the data, as follows: $\chi^2 = 304.459$, $df = 220$; RMSEA = 0.051, $CI_{90\%} = 0.036$ to 0.064; CFI = 0.94.

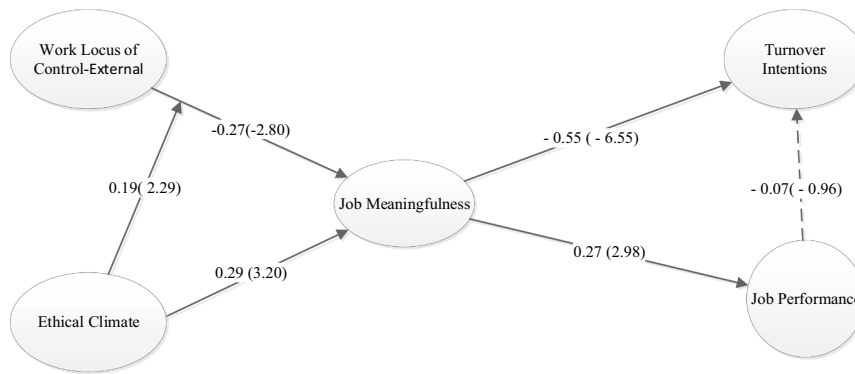
The results show that all of the stated main hypotheses were supported. A salesperson's perception of the firms' ethical climate was positively related to job meaningfulness ($\beta = 0.29$, $t = 3.20$), thus supporting H1. Additionally, a salesperson's external WLOC is negatively related ($\beta = -0.27$, $t = -2.80$) to job meaningfulness, thus supporting H2. Job meaningfulness was found to be positively related to job performance ($\beta = 0.27$, $t = 2.98$) (H3) and negatively related to turnover intentions ($\beta = -0.55$, $t = -6.55$) (H4). For this study, job performance did not show a significant relationship ($\beta = -0.07$, $t = -0.96$) with turnover intentions (H5). Table 2 shows standardized path coefficients and associated t values for constructs that were tested in the model.

The moderating impact construct showed that the ethical climate had a mitigating effect on the negative relationship between external WLOC and job meaningfulness. None of the control variables showed any significant relationship with the constructs in the model. Becker (2005) states that to rule out the question of control variables as the potential reasons for the results, the model should be tested with and without control variables and the two results should be compared. If the results are not different, then the potential influence of controls on the results can be ruled out. Accordingly, we ran a second model without

Table 1
Correlation matrix and descriptive statistics.

	WLOC	ETC	MEAN	GOAL	TOI	AGE	TENURE
	1	2	3	5	6	7	8
1 Locus of control (external)	0.72						
2 Ethical climate	-0.15	0.85					
3 Meaningful work	-0.31	0.38	0.83				
5 Job performance	-0.18*	0.01	0.25	1.0			
6 Turnover intentions	0.34	-0.30	-0.58	-0.21	0.71		
7 Age	-0.20	-0.04	-0.1	-0.02	-0.06	1.0	
8 Tenure	0.01	-0.06	0.00	0.07	0.00	0.33	1.0
Gender (male = 1)	-0.09	0.08	0.04	-0.01	-0.13	0.20	-0.03
Mean	5.33	6.22	6.14	87.89	2.08	39.59	6.99
Standard deviation	1.19	0.97	0.82	22.73	1.46	11.72	7.37
Composite reliability	0.81	0.88	0.90	1.00	0.70		
Average variance extracted	0.52	0.64	0.68	1.00	0.50		
Maximum shared variance	0.12	0.14	0.34	0.06	0.34		

Note: Bolded standardized coefficients significant at $\alpha < 0.01$; *standardized coefficients in italics significant at $\alpha < 0.05$. Cronbach's α is on the diagonal.



Control Variables
 Gender (Male = 1)
 Tenure in the Firm
 Age

Fig. 1. A model of the joint impact of the ethical climate and external work locus of control on job meaningfulness.

Table 2
 Path coefficients for the tested model.

	Dependent variable	Standardized beta	t value
Independent variable			
1. Ethical climate	Job meaningfulness	0.29	3.20
2. Work locus of control - external	Job meaningfulness	-0.27	-2.80
3. Job meaningfulness	Job performance	0.27	2.98
4. Job meaningfulness	Turnover intentions	-0.55	-6.55
5. Job performance	Turnover intentions	-0.07	-0.96
Control variables			
Age	Job meaningfulness	0.06	0.66
Age	Job performance	-0.07	-0.79
Age	Turnover intentions	0.07	0.86
Gender (male = 1)	Job meaningfulness	-0.03	-0.38
Gender (male = 1)	Job performance	0.01	0.07
Gender (male = 1)	Turnover intentions	-0.12	-1.67
Tenure in the firm	Job meaningfulness	0.01	0.07
Tenure in the firm	Job performance	0.08	0.95
Tenure in the firm	Turnover intentions	0.00	0.05

the control variables and the path coefficients were identical, thus ruling out the control variables as a potential explanation of the results (Becker, 2005). Fig. 2 illustrates the moderation effects of the salespeople's ethical climate perceptions on this relationship.

Since all of the responses for the study were collected using a one-time questionnaire, the potential for common method bias (CMB) influencing the study results is a major concern (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee, & Podsakoff, 2003). The absence of CMB was confirmed by using a latent factor method (Podsakoff et al., 2003), which is considered to be one of the more vigorous tests for common method bias. Following this procedure, all measures in the structural model were loaded on a single latent factor, in addition to their respective factors, and a structural model was run using AMOS 23. The results showed that the pattern of the path coefficients was similar to the model used for testing the hypotheses, thus providing evidence that the relationships were not significantly affected by CMB (Podsakoff et al., 2003; Sonenshein & Dholakia, 2012).

5. Discussion and implications

The study results show that a firm's ethical climate and WLOC play a direct role in an employee's perceptions of their job meaningfulness and have an indirect impact on job performance and turnover intentions. A

meaningful job that enables an employee's need for personal growth contributes to the organizational goals and increases self-worth, which can lower work stress, improve mental health, job satisfaction and commitment to the organization (Jaramillo et al., 2013). Zimmerman and Darnold (2009) believe that successful salespeople who may be exploring outside job opportunities are likely to abandon their turnover intentions if they are assigned to a job and a role that they find meaningful and that is valued by the organization.

In addition to contributing to job meaningfulness, an employees' ethical climate perceptions also help mitigate the negative influence of WLOC on job meaningfulness. This is in line with Chen and Hou's (2016) argument that the presence of a strong ethical climate may create a fair and equitable work environment where employees find work meaningful, desirable and rewarding. Rewards, both tangible and intangible, provide the extra boost to propel employees to provide higher effort and performance to meet objectives. Researchers in ethics suggest the possibility of an employee's perception of a strong ethical climate manifesting itself as moral motivation for greater effort (Treviño, Weaver, & Reynolds, 2006). The sales literature also indicates that an employee may accept corporate ethical guidelines as an external control that standardizes behavior by encouraging adherence to shared values and aspirations (Weaver, Trevino, & Cochran, 1999). This beneficial role played by a firm's ethical climate in shaping a salesperson's attitudes and behaviors continues to be of interest to both practitioners and academics and may be a rich area to pursue in future studies, especially with the changing workplace composition.

The practical significance of a firm's ethical climate exemplifies the importance of hiring, socializing and developing sales professionals who adhere to personal and professional honesty and integrity in their values and actions. Salespeople and sales managers who exhibit strong ethical sales attitudes and behaviors can be expected to support and contribute to the sales organization's ethical climate (Mulki et al., 2009). Schwepker Jr. and Hartline (2005) suggest that "to create a more ethical climate, managers should take steps to enhance code internalization by actively socializing employees on ethical expectations, enforcing ethical codes, and promoting the open discussion of ethics on the job" (p. 389).

5.1. Theoretical contributions

This study contributes to the knowledge about the impact of the ethical climate and external WLOC in three important ways. First, this study shows that an employee's ethical climate perceptions can stimulate the drive to lower the negative impact of external WLOC on work

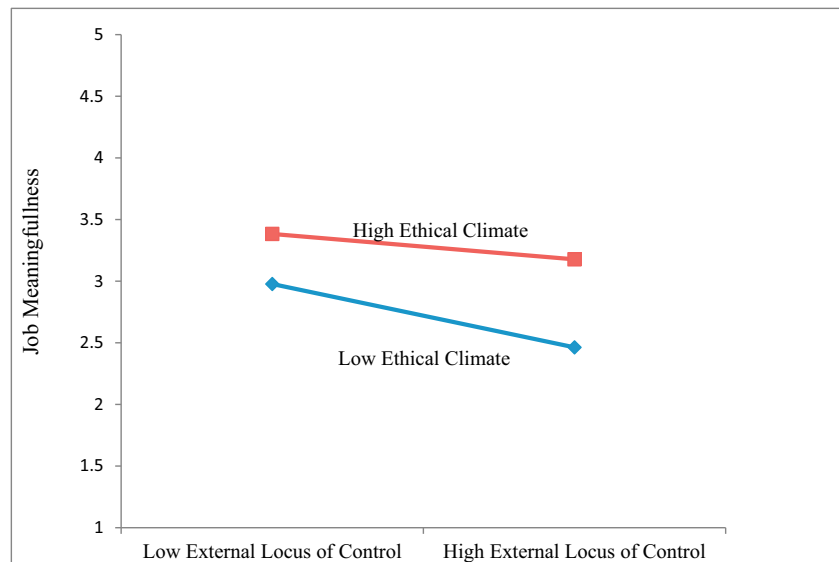


Fig. 2. The moderating effect of the ethical climate on the external work locus of control and job meaningfulness relationship.

situations. Here, a firm's ethical climate moderated the relationship between external WLOC and job meaningfulness such that the negative impact of external WLOC on job meaningfulness is mitigated when salespeople have high ethical climate perceptions. This is in line with Spector's (1982) findings that individuals with external WLOC perform better when they perceive organizational controls in place, as well as Hyatt and Prawitt's (2001) results that showed that those individuals with external WLOC exhibited higher performance levels in a structured firm compared to unstructured firms. This finding is important because a salesperson who perceives their sales job as meaningful is more likely to be more productive and to attain higher percentages of goal achievement and is less likely to leave the firm, a costly expense to the sales organization. Therefore, a salesperson's perception of a strong ethical climate mitigates the negative effects of one's external WLOC on this relationship. To the best of our knowledge, this study is the first that has explored the joint interaction of ethical climate and external WLOC on these attitudes and behaviors and illustrates the mitigation of negative effects.

Second, this study expands the sales literature by further exploring external WLOC, as called for by Hamwi et al. (2014), by showing the negative relationship between a salesperson's external WLOC and job meaningfulness by identifying how an organization's ethical climate can mitigate this relationship. Researchers note that this exploration is particularly relevant to understand salespeople who work in international locations where external WLOCs are more prominent (Spector et al., 2002) and in the U.S., where external WLOC is found to be higher in the millennial generation than in prior generations (Twenge et al., 2004).

Third, this study further explores the importance of job meaningfulness to salespeople and their performance. An ethical climate has been shown to positively impact employees' attitudes and behaviors and this study supports this relationship between an ethical climate and job meaningfulness (Forte, 2004; Jaramillo et al., 2013). Likewise, one's feelings about the meaningfulness of his/her job impacts his/her job performance (Jaramillo et al., 2013). In this study, we find that the more that a salesperson perceives his/her job as meaningful, the higher

the level of goal attainment that the salesperson is able to achieve. Alternatively, the lower the level of job meaningfulness perceived by the salesperson, the more likely he/she is to leave the sales organization. Thus, this study identifies one path that the sales organization, through its ethical climate, can enhance feelings of job meaningfulness in its sales force to influence important job outcomes.

5.2. Managerial implications

This study provides several important managerial implications because of the consequences of employee turnover to organizations in the current market marked by a strong economy and tight labor market. In a recent *Bloomberg BusinessWeek* article, Soper (2018) states that "a company with 10% turnover rate has to dedicate 5% of its annual payroll to recruit, hire and train replacements" (p. 23). In light of this, the study results show that a meaningful job, and not necessarily job performance, is often the reason to entertain turnover intentions and is becoming important and is gaining the attention of organizations. These findings could certainly be true for voluntary turnover situations and are in line with Pink's (2011) assertion that employees prefer "purpose maximizing" jobs rather than "profit maximizing".

Some organizational researchers posit that the millennials who are entering the workforce have higher self-esteem and have a higher external locus of control (Twenge et al., 2010). This supposition of a higher external WLOC of millennials opens up a good avenue for future research because of its impact on the salespeople. Twenge and Campbell (2008) believe that the millennials' higher self-expectations may explain their tendency to blame uncontrollable external causes for poor performance. Millennials also have different attitudes towards work, organizations and lifestyle compared to other generations (Twenge et al., 2010). As baby boomers continue to retire, organizations realize the importance of structuring the job to make it meaningful. Clearly positioning the potential job in the minds of job seekers, as well as current employees, is critical to attract, recruit and retain younger workers. Along with a meaningful job, work-life balance is another important requirement in today's workforce of millennials.

Karkouliau et al.'s (2016) study showed that individuals with higher internal WLOC have a lower perception of work interfering with personal life than those with an external WLOC. This study also showed gender differences in the WLOC and work life conflict relationships and highlighted the importance of structuring stress reduction strategies that are based on the employees' WLOC.

Jaramillo et al.'s (2013) study leads to the suggestion that a firm's ethical reputation can add value, create a better work environment, and enhance the commitment to the organization and the job. While there is still some debate about the effectiveness of non-monetary incentives in sales jobs, studies have shown that a firm's ethical reputation and potential for self-growth on the job are highly valued by salespeople (Barrick et al., 2013; Jaramillo et al., 2013; Morgeson, Delaney-Klinger, & Hemingway, 2005). The study's findings about the countervailing influence of an ethical climate as an external control can be useful to sales managers who can highlight the importance of ethical behavior through training programs, acting as a role model and by mentoring salespeople (Hyatt & Prawitt, 2001). This will require managers to pay attention to the employees' need for reassurance and mentoring. Twenge and Campbell (2012) state that millennials “thrive in environments where they are given careful guidance and instructions (p. 7)” and should be very open to mentoring and welcome directions to improve performance.

Once hired, managing expectations, establishing phases for goal achievement and linking small successes to an individual's skills and actions can help develop the perception of having control over outcomes and associating effort with success. In addition to their own mentoring, managers should entrust senior salespeople to model their behavior and provide positive feedback to new hires. Since millennials are known to place more importance than baby boomers on status and money and value being leaders (Twenge & Campbell, 2012), training

that reinforces the notion of meeting and exceeding goals as a pathway to career progression could be effective in countering their external WLOC.

5.3. Limitations and future research

As with all research, this study has several limitations. First, all study constructs were collected via a self-report survey, which is associated with the potential for common method bias. To explore the impact of common method bias, established tests were used and indicated no significant influence on the study results (Podsakoff et al., 2003). Second, the survey results are based on a cross-sectional sample of United States business-to-business salespeople. While the causality of the model relationships explored cannot be established with a cross-sectional sample, the study's hypotheses were developed from theory and prior empirical research. Third, the study results are based on data collected from a single business-to-business sales organization. We call for further research in other sales settings, such as retail, direct selling and business-to-business selling, in a variety of industries to be performed, particularly with millennial salespeople who may be more likely to have an external WLOC. Additionally, we suggest validating these findings in countries where an external WLOC is prevalent. Expanding the scope of this research to other types of sales settings, industries, generations, and countries would provide a thorough examination of the robustness of these findings.

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Appendix A. Measures used in the model and standardized path coefficients from the measurement model

Work locus of control (external) - Spector (1988)		
WLCE1	The main difference between people who make a lot of money and people who make a little money is luck.	0.62
WLCE2	It takes a lot of luck to be an outstanding employee.	0.83
WLCE3	Promotions are usually a matter of good fortune.	0.76
WLCE4	Getting the job you want is mostly a matter of luck.	0.66
Job meaningfulness - Steger et al. (2012)		
JOBM1	My work helps me better understand myself.	0.67
JOBM2	I view my work as contributing to my personal growth.	0.86
JOBM3	I have discovered work that has a satisfying purpose.	0.87
JOBM4	I have a good sense of what makes my job meaningful.	0.79
JOBM5	I understand how my work contributes to my life's meaning.	0.79
JOBM6	I have found a meaningful career.	0.76
JOBM7	<i>My work helps me make sense of the world around me</i>	0.48
Ethical climate – Schwepker Jr. and Ingram (2016)		
ETHC1	My company has a formal, written code of ethics.	0.80
ETHC2	My company strictly enforces a code of conduct.	0.95
ETHC3	My company has policies with regards to ethical behavior.	0.67
ETHC4	My company strictly enforces policies regarding ethical behavior.	0.76
ETHC5	<i>Top management in my company has let it be known in no uncertain terms that unethical behaviors will not be tolerated.</i>	0.57
Turnover intentions - Nadiri and Tanova (2010)		
TURN1	I frequently think of quitting my job.	0.97
TURN2	I am planning to search for a new job during the next 12 months.	0.72
TURN3	<i>I will leave this job next year.</i>	0.20

Note: Items in italics were not included due to low loadings.

Appendix B. Partial list of empirical studies on locus of control

Researchers	Sample	Outcome variables	Results
Patrick Kampkotter (2017). <i>The International Journal of Human Resource Management</i>	10,500 German employees	Performance Appraisal (PA), Job Satisfaction	Formal appraisals with extrinsic rewards cause employee satisfaction. However, high internal locus of control individuals had reduced satisfaction levels when PAs did not come with rewards but had no effect on other employees.
Silva Karkoulian, Jordan Srour, Tala Sinan (2016). <i>Journal of Business Research</i>	320 Lebanese banking employees.	Work- Life Balance (LIW-Life Interrupting Work) (WIL –Work Interrupting Life)	Work stress mediates the relationship between LOC and LIW as well as LOC and WIL. External LOC increased the perception of interference of work in one's personal life.
Hsin-Hui Hu, H.G. Parsa, Chi-Ting Chen, Hsin-Yi Hu (2016). <i>The Service Industries Journal</i>	332 frontline employees of restaurants in Taiwan	Reporting Customer Feedback	Internal LOC employees were more likely to report negative customer feedback, have higher participation and motivation in delivering service.
Hsiao Chan, Yi- Hsuan Lee, Hsiang- Heng Chen (2016). <i>The International Journal of Human Resource Management</i>	1002 Chinese Managers	Entrepreneurship, Social Capital, Human Capital	People with an Internal LOC exhibit a relatively high level of entrepreneurship, are proactive, rational thinkers and provide innovative and creative ideas. They also accept challenges and face obstacles by seeking assistance from friends or experts to obtain additional social capital.
Russell E. Johnson, Christopher C. Rosen, Chu- Hsiang Chang, Szu- Han Lin (2015). <i>Journal of Applied Psychology</i>	Two samples of students and employees	Core Self Evaluation	The relationship between core self-evaluations and life and job satisfaction, and supervisor-rated job performance is stronger for individuals with higher Internal LOC. Predictable environments strengthen this relationship.
Alex Hamwi, Brian Nicholas Rutherford, James S. Boles, Ramana K. Madupalli (2014). <i>Journal of Business & Industrial Marketing</i>	N = 140 salespeople	Role Conflict, Role Ambiguity, Emotional Exhaustion and Job Satisfaction	A higher External LOC is positively related to role stress factors; indirectly and positively related to emotional exhaustion; and negatively related to job satisfaction.
Hung-Wen Lee (2013). <i>Management Decision</i>	N = 102 Employees Taiwanese bank	Organizational Identification	LOC is related to organizational identification and this relationship is mediated by organizational socialization.
Qiang Wang, Nathan Bowling, and Kevin Eschleman (2010). <i>Journal of Applied Psychology</i>	Meta-analysis of 184 studies	Job satisfaction, affective, commitment, burnout and life satisfaction	WLOC yielded a significantly stronger relationship than general LOC for global job satisfaction, affective commitment, continuance commitment, burnout, and job-induced tension.
John Cherry and John Fraedrich (2000). <i>Journal of Personal Selling & Sales Management</i>	N = 430 sales managers	Ethical decision making	Externally oriented sales managers were more teleological in their moral reasoning than internally oriented sales managers in making their ethical judgments and forming behavioral intentions towards illicit payments.
Thomas Ng, Kelly Sorensen, Lillian Eby (2006). <i>Journal of Organization Behavior</i>	Meta-analysis of 222 studies on locus of control	Well-being, motivation and behavioral orientation	Internal LOC was positively associated with favorable work outcomes, such as positive task and social experiences, and greater job motivation.
Caroline Aube, Vincent Rousseau, Estelle Morin (2007). <i>Journal of Managerial Psychology</i>	N = 249 Prison employees	Perceived organizational support (POS), Organizational commitment	LOC moderates the relationship between POS and affective commitment.
Maria A. Leach-Lopez (2013). <i>Journal of Business Strategies</i>	N = 265 managers	Job performance, cultural values	The manager's LOC is strongly related to job performance. The manager's culture does not moderate this relationship.
Justice Tillman, Felicia A. Smith, Wanda R. Tillman (2010). <i>Journal of Organizational Culture</i>	N = 114 Accountants	Job Satisfaction	Individuals with an Internal WLOC correspond better to global satisfaction rather than the basic facets of job satisfaction.
Madeline Domino, Stephen Wingreen, James Blanton (2015). <i>Journal of Business Ethics</i>	N = 203 accountants	Ethical climate	Internal LOC directly impacts the workplace's ethical climate. A higher ethical climate fit also demonstrates an increase in organizational commitment (OC) among the sample of accountants.
Almerinda Forte (2004). <i>Journal of Business Ethics</i>	N = 214 managers	Moral reasoning ability of managers	The results of this study suggested that women had higher (more external) Internal-External scores than men, but there were no dramatic differences in their moral reasoning abilities.
Danielle S. Beu, M. Ronald Buckley, Michael G. Harvey (2003). <i>Business Ethics: A European Review</i>	N = 231 Business and Industrial/Organizational Psychology students	Ethical climate	Employees with an Internal LOC will behave in a more ethical manner.

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