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# THE ROLE OF ATTITUDES TOWARDS SALES IN PREDICTING SALES PERFORMANCE

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**Abstract**

Previous research has identified numerous employee's individual differences that play a role in predicting success in sales work tasks. However, it seems that the role of attitudes towards sales and its relatedness to sales performance has not yet been investigated, which was the aim of this study. This research was conducted on a sample of contact center agents who sell on a daily basis. We collected data on their demographics, personality traits and attitudes towards sales. The information on agents' objective monthly offer rate and sales performance across six months was provided by the employer. A series of hierarchical linear models showed that men sell more compared to women; that success in sales decreases over years of employment; that attitudes predict sales performance and that they are a better predictor then personality traits; and that offer rate does not mediate the relation of attitudes and closed sales. Furthermore, the relation between attitudes and sales was not moderated by employee's gender, level of education nor employment duration. These findings are interpreted in light of the theory of planned behavior.

**Key words:** attitudes, behavior, sales, work performance, theory of planned behavior

 

## INTRODUCTION

According to Eurostat (2019), sales workers are, along with service workers, the second-largest workforce group in the European Union, which indicates the relevance of sales in today's business. While it is possible to improve sales performance with training, part of its variance will always be explained by individual differences of a seller like personality traits, cognitive ability, decision styles, emotional intelligence, motives, work engagement or knowledge (e.g. Barrick & Mount, 1991; Vinchur, Schippmann, Switzer & Roth, 1998; Furnham & Fudge, 2008; Sojka & Deeter-Schmelz, 2008; Verbeke, Dietz & Verwaal, 2010; Schmitt, 2014). In this study, we focused on attitudes, as one of the predictors of future behaviors (e.g. Kraus, 1995; Wallace, Paulson, Lord & Bond, 2005).

### Attitudes

Robbins and Judge (2012) define attitude as favorable or unfavorable evaluative statements about objects, people, or events. Oskamp and Shultz (2005) explain one attitude can summarize many behaviors and it can be considered as the cause and the explanation of the consistency of one's behavior while having relatively enduring nature. Research showed strong attitudes are more stable over time, rigid to change regardless of surrounding context but also a better predictor of behavior compared to weaker attitudes (see Krosnik & Abelson, 1992; Bohner & Schwarz, 2001). Moreover, contextual information turns strong attitudes to even stronger ones (Schwarz & Bohner, 2001). In early research, it was considered that attitudes guide social behavior (Ajzen & Fishbein, 2005). The three-component model explains attitude as a derivation of three components: behavioral (behavioral intentions), affective (positive and negative emotions) and cognitive (ideas and beliefs) (Ostrom, 1969; Zanna & Rempel, 1988). Attitude toward sales, according to this theory, should be positive if people enjoy the selling process (affective component), persist in sales to earn more (behavioral component) and believe they are cut out for the job (cognitive component). As new measures and methods were developed, research failed to link attitudes to behavior (Wicker, 1969). Fishbein and Ajzen (1975) argued that general attitudes and personality traits do not impact specific behaviors directly and in order to use attitudes as predictors of behavior, one must match the specificity of the two measures (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1977). They proposed a distinction between attitudes toward objects (general) and attitudes toward behavior (specific). In their theory of reasoned action (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975), they argue that attitudes guide volitional actions, while their role is lessened when subjective norms are included as determinants of behavioral intention that leads to behavior. Ajzen (1985, 1991) revised the theory by including perceived behavioral control as an additional determinant of behavior, referencing to people's perceptions of their ability to perform. Theory of planned behavior (TPB theory) (Ajzen, 1985, 1991) postulates that the link between attitudes, subjective norms and behavior is mediated by an individual's behavioral

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intention. On the other hand, the influence of perceived behavioral control on behavior might be direct or mediated by intention. In terms of TPB theory, people with positive attitudes towards sales and stronger confidence in their selling skills will probably have a higher intention to engage and consequently sell the goods.

To the best of our knowledge, sales attitudes, as a specific point of view one can have about a sales job, were not studied as a predictor of sales performance. Therefore, this paper aimed to explore how sales attitudes relate to the behavior (i.e. sales performance) within the framework of the theory of planned behavior. We identified taking initiative (trying to sell) as a measure of intention and sales success as a measure of specific behavior. According to the theory, performance is a direct function of intentions which are the function of attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control. A scale that directly assesses one's attitudes towards sales, might represent an implicit compound measure of different trait predictors, thus facilitating the identification of the right person for the (sales) job.

## METHOD

### Procedure

This study was conducted in a major Croatian company, with contact center agents as participants. An on-line questionnaire was administered and each participant received an email with research information, a guarantee of confidentiality and a personalized link to the questionnaire, which enabled unique identification. As motivation stimuli, participants received a summary of their results. The employer supported the research by allowing contact center agents to take a 10-minute break in order to participate (average time needed to complete the battery of tests); and by providing agents' objective sales performance data in the six-months period from March to August 2019. The study design and procedures were approved by the ethical committee of the Department of Psychology at the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences from the University of Zagreb.

### Participants

Participants were contact center agents working at a single location, with similar or identical job descriptions and performance indicators. After the invitation, 110 agents completed the questionnaire. A total of 11 were excluded from further analysis upon data inspection. The number of participants, for whom objective sales performance indicators were provided by the employer, varied as some participants were new employees and some were not included in sales tasks in certain months. Demographic characteristics of the sample are presented in Table 1.

 

*Table 1.* Socio-demographic characteristics of the sample

| | Participants | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | Total | Male | Female |
| N | 99 | 36 | 63 |
| Age (*M*(*SD*)) | 29.68 (7.78) | 26.22 (5.45) | 31.35 (8.25) |
| *Level/status of education* (*n*) | | | |
| High school | 55 | 21 | 34 |
| University | 28 | 7 | 21 |
| Students | 16 | 8 | 8 |
| Employment duration in years (*M*(*SD*)) | 3.35 (4.62) | 1.99 (5.28) | 4.14(5.28) |
| Distribution of agents in sales roles by month | | | |
| March | 48 | 18 | 30 |
| April | 80 | 27 | 53 |
| May | 81 | 26 | 55 |
| June | 83 | 27 | 56 |
| July | 87 | 28 | 69 |
| August | 88 | 28 | 60 |

## Instruments

*Pragmatic sales attitudes scale* (PSAS; Gojčeta, Banai, Lučić, submitted elsewhere) was used as a short measure of one's attitudes towards sales on a 5-point Likert scale (ranging from *entirely incorrect* to *entirely correct*). The scale consists of four items (e.g. *Sales job is not for me, it is rather for someone else)*. The total score is computed as a linear combination of scores on all four items. Factor analysis showed a one-factor structure, with good reliability for the current study (α = .80).

*Mini - IPIP* version of the International Personality Item Pool (IPIP; Goldberg, 1999; Donnellan, Oswald, Baird & Lucas, 2006) was used to assess personality traits. Each of the five personality dimensions was measured by four items (e.g. *I have a vivid imagination*) on a 5-point Likert scale (ranging from *entirely inaccurate* to *entirely accurate*). The scale showed good reliability on the sample of this study. Cronbach's α for extraversion was α = .76, for openness α = .70, for agreeableness α = .70, for conscientiousness α = .66 and for neuroticism α = .66.

*Socio-demographic characteristics* of the sample were gathered: gender, age, education level and employment duration.

*Sales performance measures* consisted of sales scores and offer rate. Sales scores are objective performance measures in the form of six monthly aggregates of selling indicators, calculated as a weighted linear combination of successfully closed

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sales events. The weights reflect both the value and complexity of a particular sales category. The sales scores are highly objective, unbiased and reliable performance indicators. Allocations of potential customers to the agents are entirely random. Offer rate was calculated as the ratio between the number of undertaken sales initiatives, reported by an agent, and the total number of calls made by the same agent with clients eligible for offers.

## RESULTS

All statistical analyses were performed using the programming language for statistical computing *R* v.6.6.0 (R Core Team, 2019) using packages *psych* v.1.8.12 (Revelle, 2018), *lme4* v. 1.1-21 (Bates, Mächler, Bolker, & Walker, 2015), *mitml* v.0.3-7 (Grund, Robitzsch, Luedtke, & Grund, 2019) and *mediation* v.4.5.0 (Tingley, Yamamoto, Hirose, Keele, & Imai, 2014). Descriptive statistics for psychological measures, offer rate and sales scores are presented in Table 2. Skewness

*Table 2*. Descriptive statistics of personality traits, PSAS and sales scores

| | n | M | SD | min | max | SI | KI | SE |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Extraversion | 99 | 14.40 | 2.92 | 7 | 20 | -0.19 | -0.21 | 0.29 |
| Neuroticism | 99 | 10.48 | 2.86 | 4 | 18 | 0.31 | -0.29 | 0.28 |
| Openness | 99 | 15.52 | 2.89 | 8 | 20 | -0.48 | -0.47 | 0.28 |
| Agreeableness | 99 | 15.61 | 2.57 | 8 | 20 | -0.41 | 0.30 | 0.25 |
| Conscientiousness | 99 | 14.38 | 2.90 | 6 | 20 | -0.33 | -0.40 | 0.28 |
| Attitudes | 99 | 13.17 | 3.71 | 4 | 20 | -0.39 | -0.55 | 0.36 |
| Sales score March | 48 | 25.38 | 22.61 | 0 | 90 | 0.75 | 2.81 | 3.26 |
| Sales score April | 80 | 27.25 | 27.87 | 0 | 102 | 0.93 | 2.90 | 3.12 |
| Sales score May | 81 | 35.40 | 28.55 | 0 | 151.50 | 1.27 | 5.81 | 3.17 |
| Sales score June | 83 | 50.48 | 36.76 | 0 | 171 | 1.05 | 4.38 | 4.04 |
| Sales score July | 87 | 41.02 | 27.28 | 0 | 129 | 0.84 | 3.28 | 2.92 |
| Sales score August | 88 | 30.41 | 23.28 | 0 | 100.50 | 0.84 | 3.23 | 2.48 |
| Offer rate March | 48 | 0.10 | 0.12 | 0 | 0.56 | 1.53 | 5.66 | 0.02 |
| Offer rate April | 80 | 0.23 | 0.16 | 0 | 0.62 | 0.56 | 2.71 | 0.02 |
| Offer rate May | 81 | 0.39 | 0.20 | 0 | 0.83 | 0.05 | 2.40 | 0.02 |
| Offer rate June | 83 | 0.34 | 0.20 | 0 | 1.05 | 0.76 | 3.90 | 0.02 |
| Offer rate July | 87 | 0.42 | 0.21 | 0.04 | 1.15 | 0.81 | 3.98 | 0.02 |
| Offer rate August | 88 | 0.31 | 0.18 | 0.01 | 0.78 | 0.73 | 2.93 | 0.02 |

*Note. n*- number of participants; *M*- mean; *SD*- standard deviation; *SI*- skewness index; *KI*, kurtosis index; *SE*- standard error

 

*Table 3.* Pearson correlations between big five personality traits, PSAS and sales performance six-month period

| | | | | | | Offer rate (month) | | | | | | Sales scores (month) | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | N | O | A | C | P | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 |
| E | -0.11 | 0.27** | 0.00 | -0.17 | 0.22* | 0.25* | 0.25* | 0.16 | 0.09 | 0.11 | 0.13 | 0.15 | 0.18 | 0.06 | 0.13 | 0.08 | 0.20 |
| N | | 0.12 | 0.02 | -0.09 | -0.19 | 0.04 | 0.15 | -0.04 | -0.02 | -0.08 | -0.07 | -0.14 | -0.06 | 0.11 | 0.11 | -0.06 | -0.06 |
| O | | | 0.07 | -0.14 | 0.19 | 0.10 | 0.07 | -0.06 | -0.10 | -0.08 | 0.02 | -0.07 | 0.02 | 0.07 | 0.11 | 0.22* | 0.29** |
| A | | | | 0.07 | -0.03 | 0.09 | -0.09 | -0.16 | -0.15 | -0.01 | -0.05 | -0.07 | 0.03 | -0.07 | -0.08 | -0.06 | -0.09 |
| C | | | | | 0.07 | -0.15 | 0.03 | 0.03 | 0.06 | 0.14 | 0.14 | 0.01 | 0.17 | 0.02 | 0.09 | 0.10 | 0.13 |
| P | | | | | | 0.14 | 0.18 | 0.01 | 0.03 | 0.09 | 0.14 | 0.36** | 0.34** | 0.33** | 0.31** | 0.38** | 0.39** |
| Sales‡ | | | | | | 0.04 | 0.32** | 0.30** | 0.25** | 0.35** | 0.27** | | | | | | |

*Note.* *$p<.05$; **$p<.01$; E- Extraversion; N- Neuroticism; O- Openness; A- Agreeableness; C- Conscientiousness; P- pragmatic sales attitudes scale;‡Correlations between Sales performance and Offer rates, corresponds to the month presented in column

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(all < 3) and kurtosis (all < 8) indices did not indicate the severe deviation of observed distributions from theoretical normal (Kline, 2011) for all numeric variables, so we proceeded with parametric statistical procedures.

Correlations between psychological measures, offer rates and sales scores are presented in Table 3. Personality traits and attitudes were not related except for one low correlation, indicating no multicolinearity issues prior to regression analysis. Furthermore, it has been shown that personality traits were poorly related to both offer rate and sales scores, with the majority of correlations not reaching statistical significance. PSAS score was not in significant correlation with offer rate, but was moderately and positively related to sales scores. Lastly, offer rates and sales scores were moderately and positively correlated in all observed months, except for March.

To examine the relationship between attitudes towards sales, personality traits, and agents' work behavior assessed by offer rates and sales scores, we applied a series of hierarchical level models (HLM). The six consecutive monthly measures of sales scores were nested within participants. We formulated a random intercept model and used restricted maximum likelihood (REML) as an estimation method. We began the model building by assessing an intercept-only model, presented in Table 4 as the null-model. In the next steps each predictor was introduced individually into the model, and its significance was assessed by computing a likelihood-ratio test and by bootstrapping ($n$=10,000) 95% confidence intervals. Variables that were not considered statistically significant were excluded from the further iterations, while significant fixed effects are presented in Table 4.

The contribution of socio-demographic variables to sales performance is presented in Model 1 of Table 4. Gender and employment duration were negative predictors, indicating that men achieve higher sales scores compared to women, and that the sales scores decrease over employment duration. Moreover, education level was not related to sales performance, $\chi^2 = 4.54$, $df = 2$, $p > .05$. Next, we assessed if the introduction of individual differences in personality and attitudes towards sales further explained the variation in sales performance. It has been shown that none of the personality traits, namely extraversion, $\chi^2 = 2.53$, $df = 1$, $p > .05$; neuroticism, $\chi^2 = 0.02$, $df = 1$, $p > .05$; conscientiousness, $\chi^2 = 2.64$, $df = 1$, $p > .05$; agreeableness, $\chi^2 = 0.02$, $df = 1$, $p > .05$; and openness, $\chi^2 = 2.51$, $df = 1$, $p > .05$, contributed significantly in predicting sales performance. On the other hand, PSAS showed to be positively related to sales, indicating that participants with more positive attitudes obtained higher sales scores (Table 4, Model 2). Moreover, when introducing fixed effects of attitudes into the model, the effects of gender and employment duration were not significant any more. Possible moderating effects of socio-demographic characteristics on the relation of PSAS and sales score were examined by introducing interaction terms to Model 2. It has been shown that the relation of attitudes and sales behavior was the same within both genders, $\chi^2$=0.88, $df$= 1, $p > .05$; different educational levels, $\chi^2$=4.24, $df$= 4, $p > .05$ and across employment duration, $\chi^2 = 2.01$, $df = 1$, $p > .05$.

 

*Table 4.* Results of HLM predicting sales scores with socio-demographic and psychological variables

| | Null-model | | Model 1 | | Model 2 | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Fixed effects | *B (SE)* | 95% CI | *B (SE)* | 95% CI | *B (SE)* | 95% CI |
| Intercept | 35.22 (2.16) | 30.5 – 39.4 | 44.45 (4.12) | 36.00 – 53.31 | 11.65 (8.68) | -5.78 – 8.94 |
| Gender (ref. Male) | | | -9.52 (4.40) | -18.39 – -0.55 | -4.97 (4.25) | -13.56 – 3.19 |
| Employment duration | | | -1.00 (0.45) | -1.85 – -0.02 | -0.62 (0.41) | -1.49 – 0.20 |
| Attitudes | | | | | 2.22 (0.54) | 1.18 – 3.29 |
| Random effects | | | | | | |
| Participants SD | 18.30 | | 17.30 | | 12.50 | |
| Residual SD | 23.00 | | 23.00 | | 23.00 | |
| ICC | 0.39 | | 0.35 | | 0.29 | |
| AIC | 4395 | | 4390 | | 4376 | |
| LLT | | | $\chi^2 = 13.6$, $df = 4$, $p = .001$ | | $\chi^2 = 16.20$, $df = 1$, $p < .001$ | |
| $R^2$ | | | 0.13 | | 0.29 | |

*Note. B* - unstandardized regression coefficient; *SE* - standard error; CI - confidence intervals; ICC - interclass correlation; AIC - Aikake information criterion; LLT - LogLikelihood Ratio test; $R^2$ - proportion of variance between participants explained by level 2 predictors

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Furthermore, we examined if the TPB theory was applicable to sales behavior by testing the hypothesis that more positive attitudes lead to higher offering rate and consequently to a higher number of sold products. We applied model-based causal mediation analysis in three steps (Imai, Keele, Tingley, & Yamamoto, 2010). First, we fitted a model in which we predicted mediator, offer rate, given the PSAS distribution. Second, we fitted a model in which we predicted sales performance given the sales attitudes and offer rates. Finally, two fitted models were used to assess the average causal mediation effects (ACME), and the average direct effects (ADE). Statistical significance of the parameters was assessed by bootstrapping ($n$ = 10,000) 95% confidence intervals. The analysis revealed that offer rate was not a significant mediator ($B_{ACME}$ = 0.06, 95% CI [-0.22, 0.45]), and that direct effects of attitudes were significant ($B_{ADE}$ = 2.32, 95% CI [1.36, 3.29]) in predicting sales scores.

Lastly, we found gender differences in attitudes towards sales ($t(97)$= 3.00, $p$= .01, $d$=0.55) with males ($M$= 14.50, $SD$= 3.83) having more favorable attitudes compared to women ($M$= 12.50, $SD$= 3.48).

## DISCUSSION

The aim of the current study was to investigate the relationship between attitudes towards sales and objective sales performance within the framework of TPB theory, keeping in mind the possible utility in employee selection and future research. A series of hierarchical linear models point to attitudes towards sales as the most consistent positive predictor of actual sales performance, regardless of the participants' gender, education level, employment duration or personality traits. Contrary to our expectations and theory, intention to sell did not mediate the relation between attitudes and behavior. Furthermore, men scored higher in PSAS scale and sales scores compared to women. Lastly, personality traits did not predict objective measure of job performance in this study.

PSAS scale was designed to measure specific attitudes toward sales, and we expected it would correlate well with sales scores as a measure of sales behavior. According to the principle of compatibility (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1977), the relationship between attitudes and behavior depends largely on how much they refer to the same action. The more specific the attitude, the better the prediction of job performance. Ajzen (2011) argues that job performance is not a behavior, but an outcome of different work-related behaviors and situational factors that need to be identified in order to better understand the determinants of job performance. Our results go in line with this principle and Ajzen's argument. While items of the PSAS scale address certain work-related behaviors important for engaging in closing a deal, such as enjoying the persuasion component or financial incentive, the situational factors further facilitate such behaviors.

 

On the other hand, our results did not support the main postulate of Ajzen's theory (1985, 1991) that considers behavioral intention to be a mediator between attitudes and behavior, while denying the direct effect of attitudes on behavior. We used the offer rate indicator as a measure of individual differences in starting a sales process, which we interpreted as a measure of intention. In case of a mediating effect, strong attitudes towards sales would lead to a higher number of selling attempts (behavioral intention), followed by a higher number of sales scores (behavior). Contrary to our expectations, mediation effect was not found. This finding might come as a result of lower objectivity and reliability of the intention measure. Offer rate depends on an agent's report of an unsuccessful attempt and given the fact this action is not strictly supervised, offer rate might not be as accurate as expected. An agent might forget or decide not to enter the feedback in the system. On the other hand, the offer rate is an indicator of major management interest in the company, which might result in (social) pressure and consequently agents might engage in sales attempts with an intention to inflate the offer rate instead of making the sale. Finally, behavioral intention might also depend on conversation-related characteristics (e.g. client's communication style).

The TPB theory framework indicates that job performance is also dependent on subjective norms and behavioral control. Although our research design did not assess these constructs, the contact center environment enforces subjective norms by encouraging beliefs about important others (e.g. management, colleagues, organization as a whole) promoting selling as a desirable behavior. Moreover, as agents are well trained for the job and work in a technically highly equipped environment with tools to propose and deliver sales items, we believe that the perceived behavior control narrows to the beliefs about individual's selling capability. Such beliefs are partially addressed by the PSAS scale (i.e. *I find selling uncomfortable* and *Sales job is not for me, it is rather for someone else*). Also, research shows that higher levels of strength and accessibility of an attitude as well as contextual information are likely to guide specific behavior (see Krosnik & Abelson, 1992; Bohner & Schwarz, 2001; Schwarz & Bohner, 2001). This goes in line with our research as sales achievement of agents is being constantly measured and incentivized by the employer. Additionally, PSAS scale was constructed to measure specific attitudes towards sales, with a higher score indicating a stronger attitude.

Based on literature, we expected personality traits to contribute in predicting sales performance as extraversion and conscientiousness were shown to positively correlate with sales performance, while neuroticism correlated negatively (e.g. Barrick & Mount, 1991; Riaz, 2012). However, that effect was not significant in our study. Sales career may imbed auto-selection and people who find selling uncomfortable might show a high turn-over effect or may not even apply for the job. High level of workforce fluctuation in the company supports this hypothesis. Regarding gender differences, results indicate that men are better in sales compared to women, but no gender differences were found in job performance when attitudes

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are taken into consideration, which is in line with a more recent stream of research in sales performance (e.g. Siguaw & Honeycutt, 1995; Moncrief, Babakus, Cravens & Johnston, 2000).

Current results show the effectiveness of PSAS scale in predicting sales scores of contact center agents, which makes it a useful measure for both researchers and HR practitioners. Moreover, the results indicate that sales success is not dependent on the number of attempts but rather on some other factors. For a better understanding of how specific sales attitudes relate to objective measures of performance, future research should consider different approaches when defining behavioral intention and include measures of social norms and perceived behavioral control. Furthermore, a sample of men included in this study was relatively small compared to women, and the finding on gender differences in sales performances should be replicated on a larger sample of men. Lastly, findings of this study should be verified in other sales channels, as differences might be vast.

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## ULOGA STAVOVA PREMA PRODAJI U PREDVIĐANJU RADNE USPJEŠNOSTI

**Sažetak**

U prijašnjim istraživanjima pokazano je da postoji širok raspon individualnih osobina zaposlenika koje je moguće povezati s njihovom radnom uspješnosti u prodajnim zadacima. Unatoč tome, čini se da stavovi zaposlenika prema prodaji i njihova povezanost sa stvarnom prodajom nisu do sada istraživani, što je bio cilj ovoga istraživanja. Istraživanje je provedeno na uzorku agenata kontaktnog centra kojima je u opisu

 

posla prodaja. Pored demografskih karakteristika, prikupljeni su podaci o njihovim osobinama ličnosti i stavovima prema prodaji, a poslodavac je za potrebe istraživanja ustupio objektivne pokazatelje stope ponuda i ostvarenih prodaja na mjesečnoj razini u razdoblju od šest mjeseci. Putem niza hijerarhijskih linearnih modela utvrđeno je da muškarci ostvaruju veću prodaju u odnosu na žene, da prodaja opada s godinama zaposlenja, da stavovi predviđaju uspješnost o prodaji i da su bolji prediktor ovog radnog ponašanja od osobina ličnosti, te da stopa ponuda nije značajan medijator između stavova i ostvarene prodaje. Osim toga, povezanost stavova i prodaje nije u interakciji sa spolom, razinom obrazovanja ili trajanjem zaposlenja sudionika. Nalazi istraživanja su interpretirani u kontekstu teorije planiranog ponašanja.

**Ključne riječi:** stavovi, ponašanje, prodaja, radna uspješnost, teorija planiranog ponašanja

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