
Why sport ticket salespeople leave their jobs: applying attribution theory to employee turnover

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Abstract: Professional sports teams report high levels of turnover among ticket salespeople. utilising attribution theory (Heider, 1958), the current study examined the reasons why ticket salespeople leave their jobs by surveying both current and former ticket sales professionals from North American ‘Big 4’ sports teams ($N = 511$). Mutable factors such as pay, leadership style, and professional development opportunity were cited as stronger reasons for leaving than immutable factors such as team success and customer rejection. Significant differences emerged regarding factors attributed to sales success between three groups: a) those in sport ticket sales positions; b) those who continue to work in the sport industry but in a different area than ticket sales; c) those who left the sport industry altogether. The constructs of ‘ability’ and ‘training’ related to sales success were rated significantly higher, and the construct of ‘luck’ significantly lower, for those who persisted in ticket sales positions.

Keywords: ticket sales; employee turnover; salesperson; attribution theory; sport sales.

Reference to this paper should be made as follows: Popp, N., Sattler, L.A., Pierce, D. and Shreffler, M.B. (2022) 'Why sport ticket salespeople leave their jobs: applying attribution theory to employee turnover', *Int. J. Sport Management and Marketing*, Vol. 22, Nos. 3/4, pp.265–286.

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1 Introduction

Working in the sport industry is a desirable career path for many young professionals. For those seeking employment in sport, professional teams were deemed the most desirable sector (Todd and Andrew, 2008) and among North American professional sport teams, ticket sellers are the most common entry-level employees hired (Pierce et al., 2012). In fact, sales positions (primarily ticket sales) accounted for 35% of all jobs posted on sport industry job website Teamwork Online in 2019, more than doubling the next largest industry sector, and entry-level sales jobs accounted for 21% of all jobs posted on the site (IUPUI Sports Innovation Institute, 2020). In addition, robust evidence suggests many sport organisations have either substantially grown their sales departments or desire

to do so through increased recruiting efforts (Irwin and Sutton, 2011; Pierce et al., 2017; Popp et al., 2019; Wanless and Judge, 2014). Ticket sales personnel represent critical revenue generators for sport teams and events, with sport organisations seeing significant ticket revenue growth correlate directly with the employment of dedicated sales personnel (Popp et al., 2019, 2020). Thus, ticket sales positions represent the most common and valuable entry-level occupation available among a highly desirable industry employer (professional sports teams). One result of this equation is professional sport teams attract large applicant pools for posted sales positions without needing to invest heavily in elements such as compensation, benefits, or training; factors needed to attract sales candidates within other business industries (Popp et al., 2020; Wakefield, 2018b).

While sport organisations may see robust applicant pools for sales positions, they also witness high levels of salesperson turnover (King, 2010; Pierce et al., 2012; Popp et al., 2019). Despite the toll employee turnover extracts from organisational efficiency and revenue generation, salesperson departures have received scant attention within the sport management literature. Instead, nearly all prior sport sales research related to salesperson staffing has focused on the recruitment, hiring, and training process (Irwin and Sutton, 2011; Pierce and Irwin, 2016; Pierce et al., 2012; Popp et al., 2020; Shreffler et al., 2018; Tanner et al., 2014; Wanless and Judge, 2014).

Many sport teams and organisations conduct internal processes to gauge employee job satisfaction, and many hold exit interviews with departing employees. Prior research in the general business literature, however, suggests exit interviews often do not reveal the actual reasons personnel leave an organisation, as departing employees often provide inaccurate or misleading information for a variety of reasons (Feinberg and Jeppeson, 2000; Giacalone et al., 1997; Lefkowitz and Katz, 1969). To our knowledge, no prior study has examined reasons for sport salesperson turnover on a macro scale. Thus, the purpose of current study is to investigate why former sport ticket salespeople left the profession, viewed through the lens of Attribution Theory. Such an analysis may provide sport managers with a greater understanding of how salespeople view their employment experience and assist them in developing stronger retention interventions. More specifically, the study will examine the following research questions:

- RQ1 What are the specific reasons former 'Big 4' team sport ticket sales representatives cite for leaving their job?
- RQ2 Do reasons cited for leaving sport ticket sales positions differ by:
 - a gender
 - b employment longevity
 - c undergraduate degree possessed?
- RQ3 Are there significant differences between those who leave ticket sales positions and those who remain regarding attribution of sales success?

2 Literature review

2.1 Attribution theory

The current study is couched within attribution theory (Heider, 1958). Attribution theorists examine how individuals perceive the cause of particular events or outcomes and how those perceptions may impact current or future behaviour. Whether the perceived attribution is the actual cause of the outcome is often irrelevant because it is the individual's perception driving behaviour. Attribution theory contributes to our understanding of employee responses to conditions and actions within the workplace. Attribution Theory has been used extensively to examine salesperson success on the job (Johnson, 2006).

Psychology scholar Bernard Weiner (1979) was the first to establish that individuals cognitively weigh three elements attributing to significant events:

- a whether the cause of the event was internal or external (expressed as the locus of causality)
- b whether the cause remains stable or unstable over time
- c whether that cause is controllable or uncontrollable by the individual affected (meaning an outside entity controls the outcome).

Sport sales interactions provide an excellent demonstration of these three elements (Teas and McElroy, 1986). Using the example of a sponsorship salesperson completing the sale of a partnership between her property (e.g., minor league baseball team) and a local bank, the salesperson may attribute the sale to her own abilities, training, or personality; all internal loci. On the other hand, she may attribute the successful sale to the president of the bank possessing a keen interest in community engagement, a desire to gain a recognition advantage over competitors, or a love of baseball; all external loci. Similarly, the salesperson might believe her growing sales skills or the team's prominence in the community resulted in the sale; attributes which are relatively stable over time. Conversely, she may attribute the sale to good luck or meeting with the bank president after the bank had a record-setting quarter for growth; attributes which are inconsistent or unstable over time. Finally, the salesperson may believe the sale occurred because she developed a strong relationship with the bank president and followed the steps of the sale; something that is under her control. Had she followed all these steps but lost the sale, then was unable to land a sale with any other bank in town, she may attribute the lack of sales to the reluctance of banks to invest in sport sponsorships, rather than her sales ability (since she successfully sold sponsorships in other categories), a cause outside the salesperson's control.

The value of attribution theory is that by understanding an individual's perception of causal inferences, ensuing behaviour can also be understood and perhaps predicted. As a sales example, Martinko (1995) suggests "an employee who attributes the failure to make a sale to lack of ability will have a lowered expectation of future success and is unlikely to expend effort on sales in the future. On the other hand, if an employee attributes the failure to make a sale to an inappropriate presentation, that person may change his or her presentation with the expectation that a better presentation will result in success in the future" (p.4). In fact, Dixon et al. (2001) specifically examined what underlying factors salespeople attributed to a failed sale and what behaviours were expressed as a response.

For example, when subjects attributed the failure to close a sale on internal effort (something they control), those respondents indicated they were more likely to put forth greater effort in the future. However, when they attributed the failed sale on a lack of ability (something they do not control), they were not likely to put forth more effort in the future, but rather would seek out other experts to help mentor or guide them. Similarly, approaches to salesperson improvement may also be mediated by a belief that luck plays a role in the outcome, particularly among inexperienced salespeople (Le Bon, 2017). In fact, Dixon et al. (2003) extended their earlier work by examining differences between experienced and novice salespeople in regards to attributions of failed sales interactions, finding similar evidence to their prior study. Sales managers should also value an understanding to what salespeople attribute sales success because it can dictate effective managerial responses. For example, research suggests positive or negative reaction to a sales failure by managers may produce different outcomes if the salesperson attributes the failure to overall sales strategy or to individual effort (Harmon et al., 2002).

In general, attribution theory has been used extensively to examine sales success, with studies typically falling into one of two research lines: performance appraisals and salesperson motivation (Johnson, 2006). Curiously, sales management scholars have utilised Attribution Theory to examine sales failure rates in general (Harmon et al., 2002; Le Bon, 2017) but not specifically to examine sales employee turnover. Within the general business literature, on the other hand, several studies explore the connection between cause attribution and either work exhaustion (Moore, 2000) or the decision to leave a job (Harvey et al., 2008; Huning and Thomson, 2010, 2011; Parsons et al., 1985), but such studies have not been conducted specifically looking at salesperson turnover, despite its relatively frequent occurrence (Boles et al., 2012). While salespeople might leave their employer for any variety of reasons, based on prior work, it seems plausible employees who leave their jobs attribute sales success to different elements than those who remain in sales positions. If true, employers would benefit to know which elements were correlated with job retention, allowing for more effective intervention strategies (Harmon et al., 2002).

2.2 Salesperson turnover

In addition, while numerous studies have examined sales employee turnover, the key outcome variable in nearly all prior studies is a measure of turnover intention, which can be problematic as intention does not necessarily equal behaviour. Sales researchers have frequently examined factors impacting employees' likelihood to leave their job (turnover intent), such as demographic variables and personal characteristics of sales hires (Lewin and Sager, 2010; Tyagi and Wotruba, 1993; Wren et al., 2014), trust level and perceived justice of managers (Brashear et al., 2005; Hartmann and Rutherford, 2015), the ethical culture of the organisation (Schwepker, 2001), the leadership style of the sales manager (Jaramillo et al., 2009), and work effort, sales skills, or compensation of the salesperson (Kuvaas et al., 2016; Lai and Chen, 2012; Pettijohn et al., 2007). However, few prior salesperson studies utilise actual job leavers as subjects; such a study certainly has not been conducted examining sport ticket salespeople, despite the acknowledgement that it is a shortcoming of this research line (Tanner et al., 2014).

Salesperson turnover within the sport industry is common (King, 2010; Mickle, 2010; Pierce and Irwin, 2016; Sattler and Warren, 2016). Better salesperson recruitment and

hiring methods would likely result in elevated retention rates, but such efforts require the expenditure of greater organisational resources (Irwin and Sutton, 2011; Popp et al. 2020; Wanless and Judge, 2014). In addition, a study by Weilbaker and Merritt (1992) and a follow-up by Wiles and Spiro (2004) revealed significant discrepancies between what sales recruiters believe potential employees find important in job selection and the actual factors employees identified. A more nuanced understanding of why sport salespeople leave the profession would allow sport managers to modify or improve current employment practices, enabling organisations to grow salesperson retention rates and reduce the disconnect observed in the recruitment phase of the hiring process. Within the sport and leisure industries, employee retention leads to greater organisational efficiency, but retention strategies often fall short of expectations with a greater understanding of difference among employee expectations needed to alleviate the issue (Hanlon and Jago, 2004; Kim, 2014; Wells and Peachey, 2011).

2.3 General factors impacting ticket salesperson retention

While the scholarship examining sport ticket salespeople is somewhat limited, it is sufficient enough to help generate a few general hypotheses explaining the high rate of sport ticket salesperson turnover. For one, while recent college graduates desiring to enter the sport industry may apply for sales positions, it is often not their preferred occupation within the industry (Sattler and Warren, 2016; Shreffler et al., 2018). In fact, they often view ticket sales as a short-term stepping-stone to better opportunities in the field. The issue is exacerbated by sport management degree programs' relatively poor record of incorporating sales training into their curricula relative to the job opportunities (Eagleman and McNary, 2010; Pierce, 2019; Shreffler et al., 2018). Thus, salesperson departures may be due in part to employee preferences, unmet job expectations, or poor pre-professional preparation (Pierce and Irwin, 2016; Tanner et al., 2014).

Second, workplace culture and managerial style impact both job choice and job satisfaction among sport salespeople (Popp et al., 2019; Tanner et al., 2014). Anecdotally, sales managers have cited factors such as low compensation, long hours, poor strategic management and micromanagement (Bouchet et al., 2011; Clapp, 2016; Sutton, 2019; Wakefield, 2018a, 2018b) as reasons why entry-level ticket salespeople leave the profession, but the relative importance of such factors on the decision to quit has not been empirically investigated. Of particular note, the relationship between low pay and salesperson turnover is not clear in the sport industry. On one hand, those desiring to work in the sport industry (in both sales and non-sales roles) have higher salary expectations than industry norms (Mathner and Martin, 2012) and sport ticket sales managers acknowledge base pay is typically below that of entry level sales positions in other industries (Apple, 2020; Sutton, 2019). Despite knowing jobs in the sport industry typically require long hours for low pay, sport management students suggest it does not deter them from entering the field (Harris et al., 2015). This may not be true, however, for students in non-sport management majors, who may not understand this gap between expectation and reality. Once employed, many workers in professional sports are generally ambivalent about their salaries, (Smucker and Kent, 2004) and low salary is not a predictor of job satisfaction in many sport industry positions (Ross et al., 2014; Winkelmann and Eberman, 2017). In fact, O'Reilly et al. (2018) found sponsorship sales personnel for North American professional sports teams show high levels of satisfaction with their compensation and unlike many other positions in the sport industry, nearly all

sales positions provide commission, allowing top performers to earn substantially above their base salary.

Sports organisations have demonstrated a relatively poor job of providing continuing education and sales training or clear pathways for career growth (Bouchet et al., 2011; O'Reilly et al., 2018; Pierce and Irwin, 2016; Popp et al., 2019). This occurs despite a backdrop of evidence suggesting sport salespeople who spend a larger percent of their time in professional development activities are significantly more likely to continue working in sales (Pierce et al., 2013). In their study examining sport industry employees, Weight et al., (2021) found entry-level employees demonstrated clear motivation to grow, but desired greater training and mentorship to enable career progression. This issue is particularly acute for female sport salespeople, who have indicated facing greater challenges (e.g., sexism, harassment, work-life balance, etc.) than their male salesperson peers, impacting their sales career trajectory (Miller et al., 2017; Pierce et al., 2013; Sattler et al., 2018).

3 Methods

To conduct the current study, the research team sought respondents who had been employed as ticket salespeople, with some portion of the sample continuing to work in sport ticket sales and some no longer employed in the profession, thus allowing comparisons to be made between groups. To develop such a database, the research team identified online media guides from North American 'Big 4' sports teams listing the names of entry-level ticket sales representatives. Once names were collected, they were cross-referenced through the social media platform LinkedIn. LinkedIn displays the employment history of members and thus provided the research team with the ability to confirm whether an individual had worked as a ticket salesperson for a particular team. LinkedIn also allows members to send an electronic invitation to connect with individuals and the ability to embed a short message within that invitation. By searching for subjects via LinkedIn, the research team was able to both confirm employment data about the individual and also send an invitation to complete an anonymous online survey.

3.1 Instrument

To conduct the current study, the research team developed an electronic instrument to capture whether a person was still employed as a sport ticket salesperson and if not, the primary reason(s) for leaving the position. If respondents indicated they had left their ticket sales position, they were asked to rank 15 items on 5-point Likert-type agreement scales as to how much that particular reason influenced their decision to leave. Factors were adapted from an instrument used in a similar study conducted by Scott et al. (2017) examining employees who left the tech industry and represented commonly held assumptions about why entry-level sport ticket salespeople leave the profession. Examples of factors from the Scott et al. study included items such as 'low pay', 'poor management', and 'too much pressure'. The research team also included additional factors unique to sport ticket sales positions such 'high levels of rejection' and 'poor team performance'. All respondents were also asked to complete the 15-item Successful Sales Attribution Scale developed and validated by Dixon et al. (2001) and Dixon et al. (2003).

The attribution scale was comprised of 15 items measuring five constructs of attribution theory (three items for each construct) related to sales success:

- a effort
- b ability
- c task
- d strategy
- e luck.

Respondents completed 5-point Likert-type scales for each item, anchored by 'strongly disagree' and 'strongly agree'. Of note, the aforementioned Dixon et al. studies asked respondents to focus on a single sales success while the current study focused on general job success and respondents' decision to continue/leave their position. Thus, a decision was made to adjust one construct from a focus on sales 'strategy', which implied a single sale, to a focus on overall sales 'training', implying general job preparation rather than a single sale, to align more closely with the purpose of the study. The survey also captured respondent demographic data. At the end of the survey, respondents were offered the opportunity to submit their email address, which could not be linked to their responses, to be placed in a drawing to win one of four \$50 Amazon gift cards.

Once the instrument was developed, it was pilot tested for content validity and readability by 10 individuals, nine of whom were former sport ticket salespeople for major league sports teams and one who was a current sport ticket sales manager for a National Basketball Association (NBA) team. After gathering feedback from the pilot test, the research team made revisions to some items and to the directions for the survey. Upon obtaining IRB approval, the researchers distributed invitations containing a link to the electronic survey via LinkedIn requests, as described above.

In developing the initial subject database, the research team obtained online, electronic media guides for:

- a 21 Major League Baseball (MLB) teams for some or all of the seasons between 2015 and 2019, producing a list of 458 salesperson names
- b 26 NBA teams for some or all of the seasons between 2015–2016 and 2018–2019, producing a list of 842 names
- c 20 National Hockey League (NHL) teams for some or all of the seasons between 2015–2016 and 2018–2019 producing a list of 348 names
- d 12 National Football League (NFL) teams for some or all of the seasons between 2015 and 2019, producing a list of 208 names.

After removing names which could not be matched to a LinkedIn profile or were duplicates (because the individual worked for multiple teams), survey invitations were sent to 1,737 individuals.

3.2 *Results*

After invitations were sent, 511 people completed all or a significant portion of the survey for a response rate of 29.4%. Among all respondents, 73.2% were men. Prior

studies examining sport salespeople also suggested the industry sector skews heavily toward males; 90% of O'Reilly et al.'s (2018) sample of sponsorship salespeople in the 'Big 4' leagues were men, while in Pierce et al.'s (2013) sample of professional sports teams' ticket sales employees, 73.8% of respondents were male. The mean age of respondents in the current study was 27 years old and the median length of time respondents had worked in ticket sales for a major league team was two years and four months. A total of 51.7% of respondents were no longer working in the sport industry, while 32.3% were still employed as ticket salespeople. The remaining 16.0% indicated they were currently working within the sport industry but in a different capacity than ticket sales. Respondents were asked in which 'Big 4' league they had been employed as a ticket salesperson, which meant they could have worked in multiple leagues. A total of 32.5% of respondents had worked in MLB, 43.4% had worked in the NBA, 26.8% had worked in the NHL, and 22.9% had worked in the NFL. When asked what type of undergraduate degree respondents had earned, 54.6% indicated a degree in sport management, 25.8% indicated a degree in business/marketing/finance, 9.7% in communication/journalism, and 9.9% indicated a degree in another field or general studies.

To answer the first research question, descriptive statistics were examined. Respondents who were no longer working in sport ticket sales ($n = 298$) were asked how much of a factor a particular item was in the decision to leave sport ticket sales on a 5-point, Likert-type scale (1 = not a factor at all, 5 = a primary factor). Respondents who indicated they left their ticket sales position involuntarily ($n = 48$) were not included in the sample of 298; approximately half of these individuals indicated the reason they were let go was due to the COVID pandemic. Items producing the highest means were low pay ($M = 4.07$, $SD = 1.19$), limited potential for advancement ($M = 3.67$, $SD = 1.31$), too many hours ($M = 3.20$, $SD = 1.44$) and poor management/leadership ($M = 3.20$, $SD = 1.54$). Respondents could also indicate an 'other' factor that played an important role their decision to leave. Responses made by multiple people for the 'other' category included 'relocation/spouse found new job', 'went back to school', 'burnout/wanted a more challenging job', 'wanted to move into a different industry segment', and 'poor company culture'. For complete mean scores and standard deviations, see Table 1. Respondents were also asked to identify the single factor playing the largest role in their decision to leave ticket sales. 'Low pay' was selected by 40.3% of respondents, followed by 'poor management/leadership' at 16.1% and 'limited potential for advancement' selected by 14.4% of respondents. No other factor received more than 5% support.

To answer RQ2, a series of analysis of variance (ANOVA) tests were conducted to determine whether differences in group mean scores for factors driving respondents out of ticket sales positions were significant. The first independent variable examined was gender. Among the 15 dependent variables examined, two group mean scores were significantly different at the $p < .05$ level; 'expected to put in too many hours' [$F(1, 284) = 4.123$, $p = .043$] and 'customers were rude' [$F(1, 283) = 4.492$, $p = .035$]. In both cases, females reported higher mean scores. For 'expected to put in too many hours', female responses had a mean score of 3.46 ($SD = 1.43$) while male responses had a mean score of 3.08 ($SD = 1.43$). For 'customers were rude', female responses had a mean score of 2.26 ($SD = 1.21$) while male responses had a mean score of 1.95 ($SD = 1.06$).

Table 1 Reasons for leaving a sport ticket sales position

Reason	Overall		Gender				Longevity				Degree type			
	Mean	SD	Female (n = 82)		Male (n = 204)		22 months or fewer (n = 82)		> 22 months (n = 78)		SM degree (n = 146)		Non-SM degree (n = 141)	
			Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Low pay	4.07	1.19	3.96	1.35	4.10	1.13	4.27	1.06	4.19	1.08	3.92*	1.28	4.22*	1.08
Limited potential for advancement	3.67	1.31	3.54	1.37	3.69	1.28	3.53*	1.30	3.94*	1.24	3.55	1.33	3.76	1.27
Poor management/leadership	3.20	1.54	3.27	1.66	3.17	1.51	2.83*	1.48	3.64*	1.46	3.10	1.52	3.31	1.58
Expected to put in too many hours	3.20	1.44	3.46*	1.43	3.08*	1.43	3.07	1.39	3.42	1.47	3.17	1.44	3.23	1.45
Passed over for promotion	2.39	1.44	2.43	1.52	2.36	1.40	2.09*	1.36	2.65*	1.50	2.20*	1.37	2.59*	1.49
Working for a professional sports team is not what I thought it would be	2.35	1.33	2.46	1.43	2.28	1.28	2.41	1.26	2.50	1.26	2.38	1.35	2.29	1.29
Lack of benefits	2.28	1.37	2.23	1.34	2.31	1.37	2.41	1.49	2.10	1.23	2.25	1.33	2.33	1.39
Inadequate training/professional development	2.24	1.31	2.16	1.41	2.26	1.29	1.89*	1.17	2.36*	1.33	2.18	1.27	2.28	1.38
Sport team performance	2.15	1.33	2.28	1.43	2.08	1.26	2.40	1.42	2.32	1.30	2.14	1.31	2.16	1.34
Customers were rude	2.05	1.13	2.26*	1.21	1.95*	1.06	2.16	1.15	2.14	1.21	1.98	1.11	2.12	1.13
Recruited away	2.05	1.37	1.96	1.43	2.08	1.33	2.01	1.34	1.99	1.26	2.09	1.40	2.01	1.33
Too much pressure	2.04	1.21	2.23	1.30	1.97	1.17	2.21	1.31	2.19	1.24	1.96	1.12	2.14	1.31
Too much rejection	2.03	1.22	2.22	1.31	1.95	1.16	2.38	1.42	2.08	1.08	2.03	1.19	2.03	1.21
Lousy co-workers	1.69	1.06	1.76	1.14	1.67	1.04	1.60	0.99	1.68	0.99	1.62	1.03	1.76	1.10
Ill-prepared for the demands of the job	1.58	0.88	1.59	0.89	1.55	0.84	1.69	0.89	1.55	0.84	1.61	0.91	1.54	0.84

Note: *p < .05.

To examine the effect of length of employment tenure, a median split was conducted on the data. Among respondents who left their ticket sales position, the median length of time they spent as a ticket salesperson was 22 months. Thus, data were split dichotomously, with the first group consisting of sales leavers who had spent 22 months or fewer on the job, while the second group consisted of sales leavers who had spent more than 22 months in a ticket sales position. Among the 15 dependent variables examined, four group mean scores were significantly different at the $p < .05$ level:

- a 'poor management/leadership' [$F(1, 158) = 12.185, p = .001$]
- b 'inadequate training/professional development' [$F(1, 158) = 5.642, p = .019$]
- c 'passed over for a promotion' [$F(1, 158) = 6.299, p = .013$]
- d 'limited potential for advancement' [$F(1, 157) = 4.048, p = .046$].

In all four cases, salespeople who had left after more than 22 months on the job reported higher mean scores, indicating the factor played a greater role in their decision to leave.

Finally, data were split by respondents' earned degree type. All respondents who earned a sport management degree were placed in one group, while students who earned a degree other than sport management (business, finance, communication, etc.) were placed in a second group. Among the 15 dependent variables examined, group mean scores were significantly different at the $p < .05$ level for two factors; 'low pay' [$F(1, 285) = 4.672, p = .031$] and 'passed over for a promotion' [$F(1, 258) = 5.349, p = .021$]. In both cases, respondents who did not have a sport management degree rated the factor as more important in their decision to leave. For 'low pay', respondents with sport management degrees had a mean score of 3.92 ($SD = 1.28$), while respondents without sport management degrees had a mean score of 4.22 ($SD = 1.08$). For 'passed over for a promotion', respondents with sport management degrees had a mean score of 2.20 ($SD = 1.37$), while respondents without sport management degrees had a mean score of 2.59 ($SD = 1.49$).

The third research question examined the role of attribution theory and its relationship to a decision to leave the ticket sales profession. Responses to the 15-item successful sales attribution scale were factor analysed using principal component analysis with varimax (orthogonal) rotation. Results of the factor analysis produced five factors, explaining 69.0% of the variance for the entire set of variables. The five factors were identical to those from the Dixon et al. (2001, 2003) studies:

- a effort
- b ability
- c task
- d training/strategy
- e luck.

The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure of sampling adequacy (KMO) (.759) was greater than .6 and the Bartlett's test of sphericity (.000) was less than .05, suggesting the variables assessed were adequately related for factor analysis (Tabachnick and Fidell, 2019). A complete table of factor loadings, eigenvalues, and Chronbach's alpha coefficients for the factors are presented in Table 2.

Table 2 Sales success attribution results

<i>Attributions</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Factor loading</i>	<i>Eigenvalue</i>	<i>Communalities</i>	<i>Chronbach's alpha</i>
Effort			3.999		0.839
I worked hard in my sales position	4.62	0.879		0.809	
I put forth the effort needed to be successful in my ticket sales position	4.64	0.853		0.76	
I put in the necessary time to be successful in my ticket sales position	4.53	0.810		0.715	
Training			2.230		0.836
My training was right for this position	3.81	0.895		0.837	
I received the right training for this type of job	3.97	0.883		0.821	
I utilised the training I received effectively during the job	4.18	0.712		0.637	
Ability			1.771		0.697
I had the necessary skills for a sales position	4.32	0.858		0.764	
My sales ability tied to my success in a sales position	4.22	0.663		0.596	
I had the knowledge and skills required to be successful in a sales position	4.39	0.653		0.558	
Luck			1.272		0.651
Sales success in our office worked out by chance	2.89	0.838		0.73	
Completing sales was typically just good luck	2.57	0.814		0.727	
As luck would have it, I did complete sales	3.89	0.577		0.428	
Task			1.076		0.660
Most sales representatives I worked with found the job to be pretty easy	2.40	0.835		0.748	
Most of the representatives I worked with found it easy to complete sales	2.92	0.791		0.679	
A ticket sales job is relatively easy for just about everyone	1.83	0.633		0.539	

Mean scores for each of the five constructs of the sales success attribution scale were calculated for all responses and served as dependent variables. A multivariate analysis of

variance (MANOVA) test was conducted to detect group mean differences between three groups among those five constructs. The three groups consisted of:

- a individuals who continued to work in sport ticket sales ($n = 160$)
- b individuals who continued to work in sports but in a non-sales role ($n = 72$)
- c individuals who left the sport industry altogether ($n = 212$).

Results revealed statistically significant differences based on job status, $F(10, 874) = 6.40$, $p < .001$; Wilk's $\Lambda = 0.868$, partial $\eta^2 = .068$. The post hoc Tukey HSD showed significant differences, $p < .05$, between respondents who left sports entirely and those who continued in their ticket sales positions for the constructs of effort, training, and luck. For the constructs of effort and training, those still working in ticket sales had higher attribution mean scores, but for the attribution of luck, the mean score was significantly lower.

Table 3 Sales success attribution scale mean scores

<i>Attribute</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>mean</i>	<i>SD</i>
Effort			
Current ticket salesperson	160	4.76	0.41
Former ticket salesperson, currently working in sport industry	72	4.46*	0.63
Former ticket salesperson, currently working out of sport industry	212	4.52*	0.68
Total	444	4.60	0.60
Training			
Current ticket salesperson	160	4.17	0.76
Former ticket salesperson, currently working in sport industry	72	3.94	0.72
Former ticket salesperson, currently working out of sport industry	212	3.86*	0.98
Total	444	3.99	0.88
Ability			
Current ticket salesperson	160	4.34	0.60
Former ticket salesperson, currently working in sport industry	72	4.06*	0.79
Former ticket salesperson, currently working out of sport industry	212	4.38	0.69
Total	444	4.31	0.68
Luck			
Current ticket salesperson	160	2.86	0.80
Former ticket salesperson, currently working in sport industry	72	3.31*	0.92
Former ticket salesperson, currently working out of sport industry	212	3.24*	0.87
Total	444	3.11	0.87
Task			
Current ticket salesperson	160	2.46	0.75
Former ticket salesperson, currently working in sport industry	72	2.37	0.83
Former ticket salesperson, currently working out of sport industry	212	2.34	0.85
Total	444	2.39	0.81

Note: *Score significantly different from current ticket salesperson at $p < .05$ level.

The post hoc Tukey HSD also revealed significant differences in attribution mean scores between current ticket sellers and those who still work in sports but in a non-sales capacity for the constructs of effort, ability, and luck. For both the constructs of effort and ability, current ticket sellers rated the attribution higher, while for luck, sellers rated the attribute significantly lower. Post hoc Tukey HSD revealed one significant difference in construct mean scores between former ticket salespeople who left the sports industry completely and former ticket salespeople who now work in another capacity within sports; for the construct of ability, those who left the sport industry completely rated the attribute higher than those who moved to another area within sports. All mean scores are listed in Table 3.

4 Discussion

The purpose of the current study was to examine:

- a reasons why sport ticket salespeople leave their positions
- b determine if those reasons are different based on gender, longevity in the position, and type of undergraduate degree earned
- c detect whether individuals who leave the ticket sales profession attribute sales success to different constructs than those who remain in ticket sales roles.

Clearly, the primary reason sport ticket salespeople leave their jobs is due to low pay. The sport industry in general, and professional sports teams more specifically, is an attractive employer for many recent college graduates and young professionals (Todd and Andrew, 2008). Because of robust applicant pools for any job within the sport industry, sport managers have been able to pay relatively low salaries and still maintain a viable workforce (Wakefield, 2018a). Such a practice, however, has important consequences, as noted by Tanner et al. (2014). For one, as employees gain sales skills and build their experience, they become more attractive candidates for other organisations and industries which may not have the appeal of working in sports but pay significantly higher wages. Many sports teams depend on the lure of working in sports as a recruitment tool, even if wages are relatively low (Harris et al., 2015; Wakefield, 2018b) but they also desire employees who are skilled salespeople. If the appeal of working in sports dissipates, it appears the prospects of selling in another industry and/or making a greater salary becomes more attractive to the salesperson. This issue seems isolated to entry-level sellers, as past research suggests more experienced salespeople within major league sports teams are typically satisfied with their remuneration (O'Reilly et al., 2018). Second, sport teams which invest heavily in recruiting and training effective salespeople do not reap the full benefit of that resource investment. By paying low salaries, sport organisations reduce expenses, but when employees leave, those same teams increase the cost of business by needing to invest in additional recruitment and training, plus lose out on employee productivity during this transition. To illustrate this point, we provide the following example.

A ticket salesperson might earn a \$35,000 base salary, and after four months of initial training and development, begins selling at a rate of \$20,000 a month. After 16 months, the salesperson leaves the job for a higher paying sales position outside of sports. Had the team paid the salesperson \$12,000 more in initial base salary, the salesperson would

likely stay on the job for a longer period of time, say 36 months. Such an exercise would cost the organisation \$141,000 in base salary, and would net a total of \$640,000 in sales, an ROI of 4.5. On the other hand, at the lower base salary and a job tenure of 16 months, the organisation would be hiring their third salesperson within 36 months. If the cost of conducting two additional job searches is \$5,000 for each search, and the two new positions each have four months of training time resulting in lost sales productivity, the team would pay \$115,000 in salary and recruitment costs in order to net \$480,000 in sales, an ROI of 4.2. While this example contains several hypothetical examples, it also ignores that salespeople in their third year are much more likely to produce greater revenue compared to those in their first year.

Another notable finding regarding reasons why ticket salespeople leave their positions was the immutability of factors selected or not selected. Sales managers have greater control over certain attributes of a job compared to other attributes. The current results suggest many of the attributes sales managers have little control over, such as the behaviour of prospective buyers ('too much rejection' and 'customers were rude'), salesperson recruitment by other employers, and the performance of the sport team, were all rated as relatively low reasons for quitting. On the other hand, many of the highest rated factors are related to organisational sales culture and are items managers control such as pay level, management or leadership style, and number of required work hours. Such findings suggest sales managers need to do more to understand how employees feel about various aspects of the job, perhaps through workplace surveys, annual reviews, and other employee assessment tools, then modify job elements to make sales positions more attractive. This echoes prior studies in the business literature depicting a disconnect between what factors sales recruiters believe potential employees value in a sales position and what the candidates actually value (Weilbaker and Merritt, 1992; Wiles and Spiro, 2004). A handful of professional sports sales managers are proactively doing more self-reflection to develop better leadership styles and organisational culture. Examples of such efforts may include creating more flexible work hours and increasing self-empowerment of entry-level ticket salespeople (Wakefield, 2018b), developing leadership training programs and restructuring compensation structures (Sutton, 2019), and incorporating efforts such as psychometric evaluations of new hires to find culture fits (Fisher, 2016). In addition, prior research examining entry-level employees in the sport industry indicates better training and mentorship may be enough to overcome initial low salaries in the field (Weight et al., 2021) and that better professional development opportunities have a positive relationship with sport salesperson perseverance (Pierce et al., 2013).

In examining the results from RQ2, the authors found key differences in leaving a sales position based on demographic groupings. Female respondents rated 'customers were rude' and 'expected to put in too many hours' significantly higher than their male counterparts. This suggests female ticket sales employees may experience more harassment from customers than their male counterparts, or at the very least, that rude customer behaviour is having a greater impact on their workplace environment, echoing the findings of Sattler et al. (2018) who revealed female sport sales managers frequently experience negative effects from gender stereotyping, discrimination, and sexual harassment. While women experience more harassment than their male counterparts across all sales settings (Fine et al., 1994; Fuhrmans and Steinberg, 2018), the unique nature of the fan-as-consumer service relationship, coupled with the non-traditional hours

of sport sales settings, may exacerbate such behaviours. Additionally, it could be surmised the long hours and weekends required for a ticket sales employee are less desirable to female employees who still carry a significant burden when it comes to household and family responsibilities (Sattler et al., 2018). Prior studies also reveal female salespeople spend more time servicing accounts than their male counterparts (Pierce et al., 2013), and spend more time in entry-level sales positions but were far less likely to maintain a sales career trajectory with a 'Big 4' team (Miller et al., 2017).

Regarding salesperson longevity, salespeople who had stayed on the job at least 22 months were significantly more likely to blame issues such as poor management, limited opportunities for advancement or promotion, and inadequate training, for their decision to leave. Such a finding suggests perhaps sales departments do not invest the same resources into career advancement as they do in recruiting and initial training, a finding supported by Popp et al. (2017), which found in college athletics, over 50% of sport ticket salespeople receive fewer than two hours a month of on-going training and nearly 16% reported no ongoing sales training. When teams lose salespeople with greater organisational knowledge and a larger number of client relationships, the effect on revenue is more impactful than when someone who has just started the job decides to leave. While many professional sports teams have greatly improved their salesperson recruitment and initial training or on-boarding efforts, the current study suggests perhaps they should also look at ways to incentivise more experienced sellers through opportunities to advance in their career and providing professional development. Ticket salespeople given professional development opportunities are more likely to remain in the profession (Pierce et al., 2013).

RQ2 also explored whether sport ticket salespeople with certain degrees cite different reasons for leaving their jobs. Sport sales positions are generally known to pay relatively lower salaries for entry-level salespeople compared to other industries (Apple, 2020; Mathner and Martin, 2012). Low pay was cited more heavily by ticket salespeople without a sport management degree than those with one as a reason for leaving the industry. Perhaps university sport management programs, with faculty who understand the job market within the sport industry, better temper students' salary expectations when landing a position in sports. In this way, an undergraduate degree that embeds experiential learning and exposes students to the nature of the sport industry serves as a realistic job preview that weeds out students based on perception of factors like low pay (Pierce and Petersen, 2010; Pierce et al., 2014; Todd et al., 2014). Similarly, employees who graduated from sport management programs are more likely to have friends and peers from their program who also earn lower salaries from sport industry jobs. Students in other degree programs such as business are likely to have former classmates who earn relatively higher entry-level salaries. Knowing this, ticket salespeople with non-sport management degrees may grow frustrated more quickly with the salary discrepancies between them and their peers working in other industries.

The third research question addressed attribution theory and its relationship to salesperson turnover. To what factors a salesperson attributes sales success (or lack thereof) dictates that employee's response, an important consideration for sales managers (Dixon et al., 2001, 2003). In the current study, sport ticket salespeople who stayed in their sales positions demonstrated notable differences in how they attributed their on-the-job sales success compared to those who left sales positions. In particular, those who remained in sales were significantly more likely to attribute sales success to effort and significantly less likely to attribute it to luck. This is notable. Regardless of whether

effort or luck plays a role in sales success, salespeople who believe it does may be more likely to either persist or leave a sales position, echoing findings by Dixon et al. (2001, 2003). While the current study did not examine causation, the presence of attribution differences to sales success could be an indicator for sales managers to emphasise the role of effort and de-emphasise the role of luck in sales success among their staffs. This may manifest itself in not only the language used by managers, but also through hiring assessments and workplace incentives. Managers who effectively screen for potential employees who demonstrate the use of greater effort (as opposed to the acquisition of greater knowledge or skills) to overcome challenging circumstances may see greater retention rates amongst their hires. Similarly, sales departments which incentivise effort, such as rewarding things like calls made, appointments set, or emails written, could very well see better retention levels than organisations which simply incentivise through sales closed, which is likely to be affected by higher perceived levels of luck.

Respondents who left the sport industry entirely were also significantly less likely to attribute sales success to the training they received. Effective sales training has been linked to higher levels of sport ticket sales success (Popp et al., 2017) and job satisfaction (Popp et al., 2019). The current results in conjunction with past research suggests sport ticket sales managers must critically assess their training methods, as training appears to not only impact sales success but also employees' desire to leave the profession. While all sales managers develop training methods believed to be effective, it is important for managers to also evaluate how training is received by employees. Sport tickets sales managers have been shown to hire employees who resemble themselves (Wells et al., 2019), but every salesperson internalises training in a different way and not all sport sales training techniques are equally effective among various employees (Popp et al., 2017). The current study provides some evidence to suggest learner-centred training may reduce the vexing problem of ticket salesperson turnover.

One intriguing result of the current analysis was a significant difference in scores for the attribution construct of 'ability' between those who stayed in the sport industry and continued to sell tickets and those who stayed in the sport industry but moved to a non-selling role. This difference was not observed between those still working in sport sales and those who left sports altogether. Many individuals who desire to work in the sport industry realise ticket sales is the most plentiful entry point and are willing to take a sales position even though they prefer to work in another capacity (Sattler and Warren, 2016). Perhaps some of these individuals perceive their sales abilities as lower but intend to work in sales only until they can obtain a different opportunity that is more suited to their skills.

Universally, all groups examined in the current study were hesitant to attribute sales success to the external 'task' of selling. All groups found the ease of the task of selling to be the factor which could least be attributed to success on the job. In other words, all participants found the task of selling somewhat difficult and did not attribute their success to the ease of the task.

5 Limitations and future research

The current study was exploratory in nature, examining why salespeople leave ticket sales positions. Little was understood a priori regarding which factors would emerge as

most significant. While it may come as little surprise to sales managers that low pay was the top reason for leaving the job, prior to the current study, little empirical evidence (Wakefield, 2018a) was available to suggest just how important pay is and how it compares to other negative factors associated with sales positions. In fact, prior research has indicated entry-level sport industry workers typically know pay will be lower, but it does not act as a deterrent early in their career (Harris et al., 2015; Weight et al., 2021) and more experienced sport salespeople are typically satisfied with their pay (O'Reilly et al., 2018). The current results now open the door for future studies examining salesperson turnover and should focus on factors such as salary and management style. Future research should endeavour to obtain and analyse related data.

In addition, the current study sought to determine whether salespeople who remained in the profession attributed different factors to their sales success compared to those who left. While this was indeed the case, the only subsequent behaviour examined was leaving the job. Future studies should examine other behaviours of salespeople in response to specific sales success attributions, as modelled by Dixon et al. (2003). Studies testing the relationship between attribution and ensuing behaviour may allow managers to intervene earlier in the process in hopes of keeping sales employees on the job longer.

On another note, data collection occurred in the fall of 2020, a time when some sport organisations were forced to furlough or let go of employees due to the global pandemic caused by COVID-19. As previously mentioned, a small percentage of respondents involuntarily lost their ticket sales jobs because of the pandemic and were appropriately classified during the data analysis process. Future research post-pandemic could reveal the true impact of COVID-19 on sport sales positions. Additionally, the current study looked specifically at North American 'Big 4' team sport sales employees, limiting the generalisability to other sectors of the industry (e.g., minor league sport, intercollegiate sport, professional sport in non-US markets). As a growing number of intercollegiate athletic departments have either hired outbound ticket sales forces or have outsourced ticket sales to third party agencies in recent years (Popp et al., 2019) it would be worth replicating the current study in other relevant contexts.

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