

# **Alleviating the Negative Effects of Salesperson Depression on Performance During a Crisis: Examining the Role of Job Resources**

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## **Executive Summary**

Salespeople struggle with depression – defined as a negative affective condition marked by sadness, inactivity, and a lack of interest – at a rate three times higher than those that do not work in sales. Indeed, the sales profession is one of the top occupations associated with high levels of depression. Toward that end, many salespeople entered the COVID-19 pandemic more vulnerable than others. In fact, not only did the crisis immediately change demands at both work (e.g., learning new technologies) and home (e.g., educating children at home), but the imposed working from home and social distancing also led to a disruption in terms of receiving social support from colleagues and friends – leaving depressed salespeople with fewer resources to meet these increased demands.

Salespeople’s mental health is an ongoing issue moving forward in both practice and research. And, unfortunately, it is only a matter of time before the next crisis emerges and impacts the sales profession. Examining the COVID-19 pandemic is therefore a key opportunity to better understand how the performance of salespeople with differing levels of depression changes as a crisis emerges, as well as what resources minimize sales performance drops. We therefore ask the following research questions: What resources help salespeople reduce the negative effect of depression on salesperson performance as a crisis raises? In other words, what can we learn from the early stages of the pandemic that can help salespeople better manage the challenges that inevitably wait for them in the future?

Using salesperson surveys matched with objective sales performance data during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, we show that depression is negatively related to salesperson performance over time and that work adaptability and family work support both reduce the negative effects of depression. However, contrary to expectations, supervisor support aggravates the relationship between depression and performance for a time but helps boost performance at the end of the observation window.

Our research offers several important implications for practice. First, firms need to raise more awareness among salespeople and managers of depressive symptoms as they also continue to keep a “pulse” on their salespeople’s mental health and general well-being. Second, firms should also provide or cultivate personal and social resources that salespeople can access in times of crisis. In that regard, family work support is a key social resource that can be cultivated via a “family-friendly” work culture while work adaptability is a personal resource that may be developed via training. Last, our research highlights that supervisor support may not be beneficial at the onset of a crisis. However, although supervisors may not serve as direct support at the onset of a crisis, it is unlikely that the absence of a supervisor is beneficial either.

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