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An Integrative Framework among Automobile Salespeople Personality, Learning and Sales Performance

Chih-Min Ma, Cheng-Tao Yu and Bor-Wen Cheng
Department of Industrial Engineering and Management,
National Yunlin University of Science and Technology, Taiwan

Abstract: In the automobile distribution centers, salespeople are the main representatives of the enterprises, who are responsible for communication, sales promotion and helping customers to make purchase decisions, thus creating revenues for the enterprises. Therefore, how to evaluate the sales performance of the automobile salespeople is always an essential theme for management researchers. This study aims to understand the impacts of salesmen's personality traits and the learning effects on the results of sales performance. The path analysis of the proposed model shows that personality traits, such as "Conscientiousness", "Extroversion", "Openness" and "Neuroticism", will influence sales performance. However, the mediated effects of learning do not have a significant influence on different personality traits. By MANOVA's *Post hoc* analysis, for male salespeople, learning is a more significant factor than it is for females'. As to financial performance, a significant difference can be found in terms of both years of service and marital status. Further verification shows that the difference comes from years of service, but not from marital status. Therefore, reducing staff turnover rate will result in a better financial performance for the enterprises.

Key words: Personality traits, sales performance, learning

INTRODUCTION

For the service organizations, the first-line employees are often the only external representatives in the sales system. Therefore, customers usually make their first image of the enterprises from the services they are offered. In car distribution centers, the first-line employees, salespeople, are responsible for external communication, promotion and creating incomes for the distribution centers. Because the attributes of the vehicles belong to high involvement products in marketing, consumers certainly need more external information and assistance in the purchase decision-making processes. Hence, automobile salespeople will undertake more functions and play more influential roles in those processes.

The importance of the successful sales force's performance measurement in marketing has been an important topic (Pilling *et al.*, 1999). There have been various theories to explain the factors to influence sales performance: the characteristics theory tried to explore what kind of personality traits should have high-performance sales (Keck *et al.*, 1995). The situational response aspect has shown that in different

selling contexts, high performance characteristics required for sales were different. Some scholars even pointed out, the interior factors (such as organizational cultures (Malik *et al.*, 2012; Miao *et al.*, 2007), or external factors (such as competition (Kotler, 2002; Majeed, 2011) would influence the performance of selling that the organization faced. Some others even explained from the views of different organizational cultures and atmospheres of the group's learning style (Rangarajan *et al.*, 2004).

Prior researches had mainly concentrated on two aspects, "personality traits" and "environmental factors" in relation to the sale performance. However, due to the fact that the automobiles are high involvement products, which require more professional techniques to make a sale, whether salespeople will exert an influence on sale performance through learning, should be considered. This study is to probe into such questions and tries to explore the impact of performance variables, not only by discussing the salespeople's personality traits, but also the relation between personality traits and learning effects to the impact of sales performance, in order to make clear about the role of "learning effects" on salespeople.

By the potential relationship among the above three factors "personality traits", "learning" and "sales performance", the main purpose of this research can be divided into the following two parts.

First, explore the different personality traits of salespeople in relation to sales performance. Second, discuss the mediated effects of learning performance, in order to understand the relationship among personality traits, learning and sales performance.

LITERATURE REVIEW

For the above purpose, this study is to explore the relationship of the following factors: first, the factors that affect the sales performance, mainly to discuss personality traits and environmental factors in relation to the sales performances. The second part is to discuss the dimensions of "learning" and since this is somehow difficult to define specifically, thus, we will use marketing techniques to express the cognitive gap and to compare the study results. Finally in the dimensions of sales performance, this study will explore both financial and non-financial indicators.

Personality factors: Sale forces would be the key factor for business survival, especially in highly competitive markets. If the enterprises want profits to keep growing, they must rely on the salespeople to promote the products launched to the customers. Therefore, the salespeople have to make great efforts to collect information and identify potential customers in order to reach the selling goals and obtain the necessary profits for the enterprise to survive.

Personality factors, in characteristics theory, mainly include the human nature-oriented, such as personality traits (Keck *et al.*, 1995), intelligence (Sujan, 1986) and the role of cognition, motivation, satisfaction (Nasri and Charfeddine, 2012) and communication (Boorum *et al.*, 1998). For characteristics theory, the ultimate two goals are the following: (1) understanding the individual's personality structure, origin, as well as other related matters and (2) understanding the motivation, behavior, life events, etc., based on the theoretical understanding of the personality of the individual. In this research, the study of personal factors only considers the origin of characteristics theory, rather than the conformation of other issues (such as intelligence, the role of cognition, etc.) arising from other specific research. Each individual has a unique "personality". When dealing with the external environment, each individual's behavior displays his/her own unique personality,

which is expressed in the performance in all aspects of physical and psychological characteristics, is the composition influenced by the inherent genetic, acquired study, external environment factors.

"Personality characteristics" can be described in many terms. The classification methods that are generally accepted mostly at present were proposed by (Costa and McCrae, 1992). This research adopts five personality traits addressed by Costa and McCrae (1992) and (Julian, 2006). Environmental factors include competition (Kotler, 2002; Majeed, 2011), characteristic of sales (Beswick and Cravens, 1977), management methods (Keck *et al.*, 1995) and organizational culture (Malik *et al.*, 2012).

Learning performance: For the learning performance, presently there is no clear or publicly recognized measurement. This study uses sales techniques and the cognitive gap of the salespeople, before and after they enter the sales system. By observing the difference in the sales techniques during the whole process, we can determine the relative degree of influence by the organizations for the individual learning, as thus we use this as the measurement indicator for the learning performance.

To evaluate the learning performance, we mainly adopt the 51-key-sales-techniques proposed by Dwyer *et al.* (2000) and further amend it to 43 sales techniques as the measurement indicators. The sale process can be divided into seven steps: (1) Expand the source of customers, (2) Prepare in advance, (3) Approach customers, (4) Sales introduction, (5) Overcome refusal, (6) Transaction and (7) After sale services. Based on each sales step we can also list out the sales skills, each step in the sales technical indicators can improve the communication and the relationships with customers.

Sales performance: In the majority field of strategic management, sales performance is a widely discussed issue, but not easy to handle. Some scholars directly link the sales performance to the profit rate; some use productivity (Porter, 1985) or sales volume to define the meaning of sales performance.

Unlike organizational performance, the sales performance of salespeople has few dimensions to be compared. There are several dimensions for evaluating the organization's performance, such as comparing with rival's financial performance, profit (sales revenue) growth, profitability growth rate, market share, launch of new products, marketing efficiency, value-added creation and other technical efficiency measures

(Powell, 1995; Smith and Grimm, 1987). However, to compare the performance of sales, we can only use the subjective self-assessment of the salespeople provided in the past three months, such as "the amount of total sales," "the total commission income" and "the quantity of total sales", etc. Other non-financial indicators for the individual level, such as Organizational Citizenship Behavior (OCBs), are also regarded as being an "extra-role performance" by researchers. Unfortunately, such non-financial performance indicators will easily interfere with the internal prone personality traits, resulting in a certain ubiquity that can affect the accuracy of human factors in the impact on performance. Therefore, the non-financial indicators for the individual level are not included in this study.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Concept model: There are many researchers who have explained how salespeople's personality traits are related to sales performance. However, none of the research evaluated the learning effects as mediated variables that can either directly or indirectly influence on sales performance. This research attempts to study on this issue by studying actual cases. According to the above literature, we provide the proposed conceptual model shown in Fig. 1.

The following results are based on the conceptual model to analyze a car distribution sales system in central Taiwan. Such system consists of 27 operating outlets; the total number of employees is about 1,200, including 350 sales staff and supervisors. This research is mainly focused on the 350 salespeople to investigate their behaviors.

Research hypothesis: According to the concept framework, his study has the following hypotheses:

- **Hypothesis 1:** Different personality traits of the salespeople will have different degrees of influence on sales performance

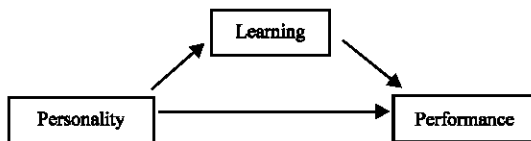


Fig. 1: Conceptual model among personality traits, learning and sales performance

- **Hypothesis 2:** Different personality traits of the salespeople result in different learning performances
- **Hypothesis 3:** The learning performance of the salespeople has a significant impact on sales performance
- **Hypothesis 4:** Different personality traits of the salespeople combined with the learning performance would have a significant impact on sales performance

Variable definition and measurements methods: In the following constructs, except the constructs of learning performance, utilize salespeople's cognition gap of sales techniques between the past and the current, each question will consist of the cognition of past/present situation, adopt classification scale of "Yes or No" and Likert 5 point scale measurement. This is, if the subjects do not have the cognitive about the sales techniques in the past, it is speculated that the current perception is caused by learning. Otherwise their current situation will be partially affected by the past experiences.

Five-point Likert scales were used to measure the remaining constructs also, from strongly disagree to strongly agree, higher scores indicated more consistence with the level. The definitions of the dimensions and the measurement of the indicators are as follows.

Personality traits (dimensions of personal factors): The definition of personality, more extensively speaking, is "personal characteristics or qualities". It includes a person's various substantive dimensions, such as physical, psychological, emotional and social aspects. This study mainly uses the five-factor model of personality classification, as the indicators for the sales staff's character. We also use the widely accepted Costa and McCrae (1992) classification as the benchmark of personality trait dimensions measurement. It includes five indicators: Agreeableness, Conscientiousness, extraversion, neuroticism and openness. Based on Lai's (Julian, 2006) five-personality scale research project.

Learning performance: For the study of learning performance, this research is based on the study by Dwyer *et al.* (2000). It proposes that in various sales stages, there are a total of 51 key marketing technique skills or conducts, which will affect the sales performance. To measure the gap of the salespeople on the technical knowledge and sales techniques as the data, before and after entering the sales system, we

compared the relative influence of the individuals, as measured by earning performance measurement indicators. All questions use a five-point Likert scales 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree) to measure, but also with 1-5 points to indicate the gap between the previous cognition and current cognition. The greater the cognitive gap, the more excellent the learning performance is deemed to be.

Sales performance: The sales performance indicators of the salespeople consists of 8 questions including: subjective self-assessment over the past three months on "the amount of total sales," "the total commission income" and "total sales", combined with the organizational level of performance such as changes in relative market share, return on investment and the success of newly launched products. Each question adopts a five-point Likert scales with higher scores indicating better performance.

Questionnaire development: This study used the questionnaire as the measurement tool. The questionnaire was based on the literature review and adjusted the relevant questions by experts and scholars. As regards the size of the company, 350 employees have been chosen as the lower limits, 86 were returned. 11 incomplete questionnaires were invalid resulting in a total of 75 valid questionnaires and effective response rate was 20.6%. We conducted a questionnaire reliability analysis. All dimensions of the questionnaire, by the STATISTICA statistical software reliability analysis of Cronbach's α , coefficients were greater than 0.7 which have met the reliability test standard.

Reliability and validity analysis: In order to confirm the fitness of each dimension, we applied Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) to every dimension with Principal Component Analysis (PCA). We also used orthogonal rotation with Normalized Varimax at the same time. Assuming Eigen values is greater than 1.

The measure was subjected to Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) to assess its measurement properties as recommended by (Gerbing and Anderson, 1988), except that "learning performance" was integrated into one factor and no further analysis was then carried out on it. The CFA of the other two dimensions revealed the following statistics: goodness-of-fit (GFI) = 0.84-0.94, adjusted goodness-of-fit (AGFI) = 0.68-0.86 and standardized root mean square residual (SRMR) is 0.05-0.07. The model fit indexes were quite satisfactory. Each priori factor loading was positive and significant and all coefficient Cronbach's alphas exceeded the recommended 0.70 criterions, Composite Reliability (CR) range from 0.69 to 0.82 which is greater than 0.60, thereby demonstrating convergent validity (Fornell and Larcker, 1981). All t-values were larger than 2.00 significant level.

RESULTS

Sample structure: In this study, 75 valid questionnaires were obtained from sales staff, 63 male (84.0%) and 12 female (12.0%). Junior college education is the largest number of 41 (54.0%) and the rest are high school (grades) or below. For the marital status, 41 (54.0%) are married, 34 (46.0%) are unmarried. The average age is 33 years old. The average length of service is 6.6 years and 26 people (34.7%) have less than 2 years (inclusive) service experiences, while 25 people (33.3%) have more than 10 years (inclusive).

Correlation analysis: Table 1 shows the correlation coefficient matrix. Overall, the personality traits and learning performance have no significant relation. Among the personality traits, "Extraversion" and "Openness to Experience" on the sales performance show positive correlations, indicating that different personality traits have indeed had an affect, to a certain extent, on the sales performance.

Although, the descriptive statistics and correlation analysis determined the general results of this study, the relationship between variables requires further

Table 1: Descriptive statistics and correlation matrix for model variables

	Avg.	Std.	Agr.	Con.	Ext	Ope.	Neu.	LP	FP	NFP
Agr.	2.38	0.83	1.00							
Con	2.75	0.76	0.44**	1.00						
Ext.	3.29	0.86	0.40**	0.33**	1.00					
Ope	3.75	0.56	-0.23**	-0.08	-0.08	1.00				
Neu	2.54	0.62	0.21	0.16	0.12	-0.45**	1.00			
LP	2.23	1.15	-0.19	-0.15	-0.09	0.16	-0.17	1.00		
FP	3.15	1.19	-0.11	0.17	-0.36**	-0.01	0.20	0.16	1.00	
NFP	4.01	0.91	-0.05	0.04	0.24**	0.31**	-0.10	0.03	-0.05	1.00

Significant correlation at **p<0.05, Agr: Agreeableness, Con: Conscientiousness, Ext: Extraversion, Ope: Openness, Neu: Neuroticism, LP: Learning performance, FP: Finical performance, NFP: Non-finical performance

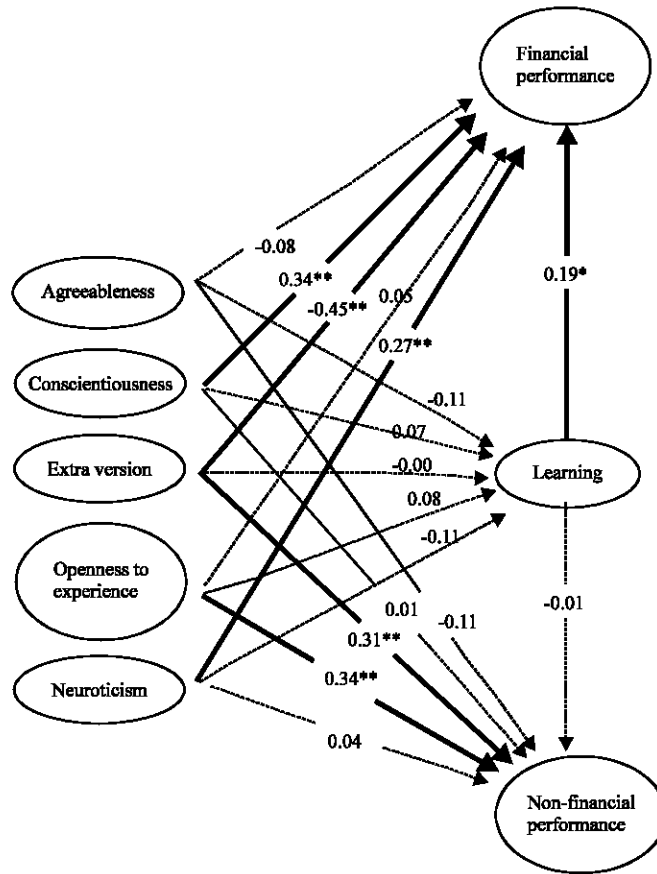


Fig. 2: Standardized path analysis model relationships among personality traits, learning and sales performance, Value on path:standardized coefficients ($\hat{\alpha}$) and ** $p < 0.05$

Table 2: Multiple regression analysis of personality traits, learning performance and sales performance

Dependent	Independent	β -value	F-test	Adjusted R ²	t-test
LP	Agr.	0.11	0.91	-0.01	-0.81
	Con.	-0.07			-0.54
	Ext.	-0.00			0.00
	Ope.	0.79			0.60
	Neu.	-0.10			-0.79
FP	Agr.	-0.09	5.24**	0.26	-0.72
	Con.	0.34			2.99*
	Ext.	-0.45			-4.06**
	Ope.	0.05			0.47
	Neu.	0.27			2.41*
NFP	LP	0.19	2.50*	0.11	1.84
	Agr.	-0.11			-0.86
	Con.	0.01			0.11
	Ext.	0.31			2.53*
	Ope.	0.33			2.63*
	Neu.	0.03	0.23		
	LP	-0.01			-0.10

Agr: Agreeableness, Con: Conscientiousness, Ext: Extraversion, Ope: Openness, Neu: Neuroticism, LP: Learning performance, FP: Financial performance, NFP: Non-finical performance, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.001$

testing using statistical methods. In this study, we use path analysis to explore the relationship between variables and hypothesis testing.

Path analysis: In this study, we use LISREL 8.3 to construct path analysis and the standardized path estimates as shown in Fig. 2, indicating significant relationships among the constructs. Multi-regression results, F-test, t-test (marginal test) and adjusted coefficient of determination R², shown in Table 2.

Indicators of overall model fit $\chi^2/df = 0.33$, adjusted coefficient of determination R²: financial performance (0.26) and non-financial performance (0.11). SRMR = 0.012, $p = 0.39$, GFI = 1.00, AGFI = 0.96, NFI = 1.00, NNFI = 1.26, CFI = 1.00. The model fit indexes are quite satisfactory and model standardized direct, indirect and total effects are shown in Table 3.

The standardized path estimates (Fig. 2) and the results of multiple regression (Table 2) indicate significant relationships among the constructs. H2 was not supported ($\beta < 0.79$, $F = 0.91$). Because the learning performance of the salespeople had no significant impact on the sales performance, therefore, H4 was not supported either. The mediated effect of the learning performance was not significant. H1 was partially

supported and H3 had a weak support on learning performance to non-financial performance, we summarize the results of main hypothesis in Table 4.

By the analysis results, the five personality traits respond differently to the selling performance, except that the "Agreeableness" personality has no significant effect to the two performances. "Conscientiousness", "Extraversion", "Neuroticism" and "Openness to Experience" have the least effect either on financial performance or on non-financial performance. "Conscientiousness", "Extraversion" and "Neuroticism" can affect financial performance significantly with t value of 2.99, -4.06, 2.41 ($p < 0.05$), while "Extraversion" and "Openness to Experience" were significantly and positively related to non-financial performance with t values of 2.52, 2.63 ($p < 0.05$). Hence, if a corporation is desirous to enhance short-term financial performance, it can seek out employees with the following personality types: "Conscientiousness", "Extraversion" and "Neuroticism". However, the "Extraversion" in the

factors is comparatively special, as on the one hand, it affects positively on the non-financial performance, while on the other hand, it affects negatively on the financial performance. We infer that the extraverted employees mostly are greatly sociable and considerate and upgrade the enterprise's image and bring the positive effect. However, it will sacrifice the short-term financial interest. The employers develop a strong sales base before hiring extremely extraverted employees and this will help prevent losses in the short-term, while providing benefits in the long-term.

Post hoc analysis: The research also has the employee titles, the gender, years of service and the marriage status as vital statistical variables. By MANOVA's Post hoc analysis, the results show that the male staff have the better learning performance than do females ($F = 3.34, p = 0.071$); the employees with junior college education have better performance than those with senior high school education; regardless of seniority, the performance is similar, but the senior sellers have better financial performance. Take the under-4-year and above-11 year employees as an example, where $F = 11.48, p = 0.000057$. That proves that the senior sellers have more extensive relationships and experience on better performance. As for the marriage status, the married employees with children have significant differences to the single employees in financial performance ($F = 7.14, p = 0.001$). Marriage status and years of service show a high positive correlation (correlation coefficient = 0.49, $p < 0.05$). The married employees with children have an average of 9.4 years of service experience, married employees without children have average 7.3 years and single employees only have an average of 3.8 years. Further verification shows that the difference comes from years of service, but not from marital status. Therefore, reducing the staff turnover rate will result in a better financial performance for enterprises.

Table 3: Total and indirect effects of personality traits on learning performance and sales performance N = 75

Correlation coefficient				
Influenced factors	Influence source	Direct effect	Indirect effect	Total effect
FP	Agr.	-0.08	-0.02	-0.1
	Con.	0.34**	-0.01	0.33**
	Ext.	-0.45**	0.00	-0.45**
	Ope.	0.04	0.02	0.06
	Neu.	0.27**	-0.02	0.25**
	LP	0.19*	---	0.19*
NFP	Agr.	-0.11	0.00	-0.11
	Con.	0.01	0.00	0.01
	Ext.	0.31**	0.00	0.31**
	Ope.	0.34**	0.00	0.34**
	Neu.	0.04	0.00	0.04
	LP	-0.01	---	-0.01
LP	Agr.	-0.01	---	-0.11
	Con.	-0.07	---	-0.07
	Ext.	0.00	---	0.00
	Ope.	0.08	---	0.08
	Neu.	-0.11	---	-0.11

Agr: Agreeableness, Con: Conscientiousness, Ext: Extraversion, Ope: Openness, Neu: Neuroticism, LP: Learning performance, FP: Financial performance, NFP: Non-financial performance, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.001$

Table 4: Summary of main hypothesis test results

Items	Hypotheses	Test situation	Significant path coefficient	Results
H1	Different personality traits of the salespeople on sales performance with different degree of influence	Con. to FP Ext. to FP Neu. to FP Neu. to NFP Ope. to NFP	:0.34 (t = 3.04) :-0.45 (t = -4.076) :0.27 (t = 2.37) :0.31 (t = 2.57) :0.34 (t = 2.73)	Partially support**
H2	Different personality traits of the salespeople with different learning performance			Not support
H3	Learning performance of the salespeople will have significant impact on the sales performance	LP to NFP	0.19 (t = 1.84)	Weak support*
H4	Different personality traits of the salespeople with the learning will have significant impact on the sales performance			Not support

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.001$

CONCLUSION

This study proposes a general discussion of mediated effects between personality traits and business performance. It is both theoretically and managerially challenging and may provide researchers with some interesting results to test and discuss further. Based on previous studies, this research has also included the learning aspects. It is used to understand whether it will exert an influence on sales performance through this "mediated variable" or not on salespeople of high involvement products. Our results establish a causal model and empirical relationships, demonstrating the personality traits of those salespeople. By analyzing the results, sales staff with those five personality traits responds differently to the selling performance, except that the "Agreeableness" personality type has no significant effect to either financial or non-financial performance. The personality types of "Conscientiousness", "Extraversion", "Neuroticism" and "Openness to Experience" have the least effect either on financial performance or on non-financial performance. "Conscientiousness" and "Neuroticism" can affect the financial performance significantly ($t = 2.99, 2.41, p < 0.05$), while "Extraversion" and "Openness to Experience" are significantly and positively ($t = 2.52, 2.63, p < 0.05$) related to non-financial performance. Briefly speaking, if the enterprise desires to concentrate on the short-term financial performance, it can hire employees with the traits of "Conscientiousness", "Neuroticism" or both of them. If it wants to develop a long-term benefit, then the employees with the traits of "Extraversion" and "Openness to Experience" will be relatively suitable to the enterprise's need. However, "Extraversion" is comparatively special. It affects positively ($t = 2.52$ ($p < 0.05$)) on non-financial performance and affects negatively ($t = -4.06$ ($p < 0.05$)) on financial performance. From a managerial standpoint, the employers should build up a solid sales base before appointing extremely extraverted employees to avoid having a negative effect on short-term interests and to ensure the employers' long-term interests.

Moreover, this study shows that learning performance has already significantly affected financial performance ($t = 1.84, (p < 0.1)$, weak support) and the personality traits in this study are unable to make a significant impact on sales performance through additional training. In other words, the mediated effect of the learning performance is not significant. To better manage enterprises, management should strive to hire

staff with personality traits meeting their needs at the beginning, rather than on education and training after the staff entered to the companies.

Finally, from MANOVA's Post hoc analysis, which looked at employee titles, gender, years of service and marriage status as the vital statistical variables, the most noteworthy one is the analysis results of the variables between "years of service" and "marriage status". The more senior the sales staff, the better the financial performance (take the under-4-year and above-11-year employees as an example, $F = 11.48, p = 0.000057$). The married employees with children also have a significant difference compared to single employees in financial performance ($F = 7.14, p = 0.001$) and this due to the marriage status and years of service having a high positive correlation (correlation coefficient = 0.49, $p < 0.05$). Further verification shows that the difference comes from years of service, but not from marital status. Therefore, reducing the staff's turnover rate will result in a better financial performance for the enterprises.

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