

Determinants of MBA Advisor Job Satisfaction: An Exploratory Study

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At most institutions accredited by the American Assembly of Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB), a single advisor works with students enrolled in the Master of Business Administration (MBA) program. This advisor provides advice on course loads as well as careers. As this advisor may make a lasting impression on students, his or her job satisfaction is critical. This exploratory study focused on four classes of determinants of advisor satisfaction. Data were obtained through a survey mailed to all AACSB-accredited schools. A regression analysis revealed that job- and advisor-descriptive variables explained most of the variation in satisfaction. Critical determinants included role clarity, work status, student orientation, and expertise in both technical and creative areas of advisement. This study suggests that full-time employment and clarification of job tasks may enhance advisor job satisfaction.

Nationwide, MBA programs produce many graduates per year. In 1990-1991, almost 79,000 business and management master's degrees were conferred, of which MBAs comprised the majority. This figure represents a five-year growth rate of 17% ("Earned Degrees," 1993). Although more recent statistics suggest declining enrollments, the numbers are still considerable. Also, the number of MBA programs in the U.S. has grown and is now nearly 800 (Deutsch, 1993). With this growth, issues regarding the management of these programs will continue to draw interest. One such issue is the advisement of MBA students. Many programs designate a single individual in charge of advising MBA students, as opposed to making this a shared duty among the faculty. This individual may be a staff member or a member of the faculty, working full or part time to provide information and guidance. These advisors will have a pronounced impact on students in the pursuit of their degrees. These advisors may help students complete their programs in a timely manner, as well as improve the fit between students' programs and interests.

The advisor will have a substantial impact on students' impressions of the MBA program, for an advisor may provide both the first impression and continued impressions as advising needs arise.

Some students desire a quality relationship with their advisor (Fielstein, 1987). Therefore, the advisor's performance of advising duties will be important. One frequently explored determinant of job performance is job satisfaction. Although this determinant has not revealed encouraging research results (Bassett, 1994), support exists for the relationship of job satisfaction with extrarole behaviors (i.e., those that are not part of the job description; Organ, 1988). As the advisor may be frequently asked to provide extrarole behaviors, advisor satisfaction may be critical. For example, some advisees may expect counseling in personal matters. As these extrarole behaviors are discretionary and dependent on job satisfaction, advisor satisfaction may be an important determinant of advisee satisfaction. This study explored possible determinants of MBA advisor job satisfaction.

In a literature review we found no studies of academic advisors' job satisfaction. Therefore, we focused on applying findings of related research on the MBA advisors studied. Given the lack of previous research, we posed research questions for this exploratory work and focused on intrinsic job satisfaction to explore the predictors of a favorable attitude toward the job itself.

In looking at the possible predictors of MBA advisor job satisfaction, we divided the exploration into four areas: job descriptive, program descriptive, student descriptive, and advisor descriptive. Under each of these basic headings, several variables were identified.

First, looking at the job itself, previous research has identified role clarity and lack of role conflict as predictive of job satisfaction (Deluga & Winters, 1990; House & Rizzo, 1972; Schuler, Aldag, & Brief, 1977). Given the MBA advisor's job, this could be an especially critical area. As we mentioned, the advisor may have other assignments and thus possible role conflict. In addition, to the extent that duties are not precisely defined (e.g., what the advisor is expected to do if a student is not able to get into a class, delaying graduation), the advisor may experience low role clarity.

Another element, related to role conflict, is whether the position is full or part time. Although

the literature presents no consensus when comparing full- and part-time workers, work status does seem to be related to attitudes regarding work. For example, one study found that part-time workers receiving no fringe benefits and performing less desirable tasks, but receiving the same pay and opportunities for advancement, were less satisfied with work and benefits. However, they were as satisfied with pay, supervision, and opportunities for advancement (Miller & Terborg, 1979). Another study found that part-time workers in a rehabilitation hospital were more satisfied than full-time workers (Eberhardt & Shani, 1984). Yet another study, using patient-care employees as a sample, found no difference in work satisfaction, but part-time employees were less satisfied with pay and coworkers (Steffy & Jones, 1990). Thus, the type of job performed and the comparability of part-and full-time jobs may impact satisfaction. The MBA advisor may find it difficult to attend to all advisees on a part-time basis. Also, given the number of working MBA students, a part-time advisor may find it difficult to schedule mutually workable meeting times, which may reduce job satisfaction.

With respect to exploring the program itself, at least two elements may affect advisor attitudes: program size and student diversity. Referring to role conflict again, demands on the advisor due to program size may lead to incompatible expectations (e.g., registration requires meeting with more students than time allows), which may decrease job satisfaction. And even a small program may attract a diverse student body, which tends to make an advisor's job more difficult. For example, a diverse program may be more difficult to manage simply because students from different ethnic backgrounds expect differing amounts or types of guidance (Hofstede, 1984).

The third area of job satisfaction predictors is student descriptive. One of these determinants is the severity of student problems brought to the advisor. More severe problems might be seen as an increased workload, lowering job satisfaction. On the other hand, they could be viewed as desirable job challenge. A professional advisor might find these problems easier to deal with than would a faculty advisor (King, 1988). In addition, the frequency with which the advisor must provide advice may also impact job satisfaction.

The fourth area of job satisfaction predictors is advisor descriptive. First of all, the length of time the advisor has been in his or her position advising individuals may impact satisfaction. Based on

the literature, however, predicting a positive or negative level of satisfaction in relation to length of time is problematic. One recent study, which looked at age controlling for length of time, found both a curvilinear and linear component in the relationship between these two elements (Kacmar & Ferris, 1989). This supports the idea that length of time in the position advising individuals is related to job satisfaction, but this relationship is difficult to describe. Second, the advisor's approach to advising may impact satisfaction. If advising is seen as providing assistance to individuals with unique problems, the advisor may experience a different level of satisfaction than an advisor who does not feel this way. If all individuals are treated as unique, a sense of role overload may lead to job dissatisfaction. However if advisees are not seen as unique, they may react negatively, leading to advisor dissatisfaction. Third, the level of understanding that the advisor has for the technical and creative aspects of the job may contribute to job satisfaction. These elements may also be related to the advisor's sense of role clarity.

Research Questions

Our literature review helped identify possible determinants of job satisfaction. Given that little or no past research has focused on MBA advisors, this study was exploratory and addressed the following research questions:

1. What impact do role conflict and role clarity have on MBA advisor job satisfaction?
2. What impact does work status have?
3. What impact does program size have?
4. What impact does a program's ethnic diversity have?
5. What impact does the severity of student problems have?
6. What impact does the frequency with which advisees ask for advice have?
7. What impact does advising experience have?
8. What impact does the advisor's expertise have?

Method

Sample

The individuals of interest in this study were MBA advisors from AACSB-accredited schools in the U.S. Advisors for all of these programs ($N = 243$) were sent questionnaires.

Questionnaire

We developed an instrument using existing, pretested scales, as well as scales developed for this study. The first portion of the questionnaire focused on demographic data, and the rest on the specifics of the advisor's job. Thirty items were included; several had multiple parts. Data on a variety of job-, program-, student-, and advisor-descriptive scales were collected. All multiple-item scales were scored by using the mean of the scale items.

Job Description. Three scales were used to assess the job. Role Clarity was measured using a 7-point, 6-item scale (1 = Very false; 4 = Somewhat true; 7 = Very true). Role Conflict was measured using a 7-point, 7-item scale using the same anchors. Both measures were developed by Rizzo, House, and Lirtzman (1970). The third measure was simply an inquiry regarding Work Status (full- vs. part-time).

Program Description. Two scales were applied to assess the MBA program itself. Program Size was established by asking for the number of students. Diversity of the MBA student body was assessed using a 7-point, 1-item measure regarding Ethnic Diversity (1 = Very little diversity; 4 = Some diversity; 7 = a great deal of diversity).

Student Description. Two measures were designed to assess student use of the advisor's services. The Severity of Problems confronting the advisor was assessed using a 4-point, 8-item measure (1 = Not a problem; 4 = A large obstacle). The items assessed problems regarding (a) not knowing the student's interests, (b) having to deal with changes in the program and market for MBA students, and (c) arriving at an acceptable meeting time. The frequency of providing advice to students (Frequency of Advice) was assessed using a 5-point, 9-item scale (1 = Never; 3 = Sometimes; 5 = Always). The measure included items regarding scheduling, course offerings, financial aid, career advice, and related topics.

Advisor Description. Four advisor-descriptive measures were administered. Advisors indicated their length of time in the profession (Advising Experience) in the demographic section. The extent to which an advisor treated advisees as unique and gave individualized attention was assessed using a 7-point, 1-item scale (Student Orientation; 1 = To a small extent; 4 = To some extent; 7 = To a great extent) based on Cottone (1991). The advisor's understanding of the technical and creative portions of an MBA advisor's

job was assessed through two measures created for this study. An advisor's Technical Expertise was measured using a 5-point Likert, 3-item scale. An advisor's Creative Expertise was measured using a 5-point Likert, 6-item scale. These measures were based on Slatter's research (1987) on the cognitive emulation approach to building expert systems.

Advisor Attitude. Job Satisfaction was assessed using a 6-point, 9-item measure developed by Weiss, Dawis, England, and Lofquist (1967; 1 = Very dissatisfied; 3 = Somewhat dissatisfied; 6 = Very satisfied).

Results

Description of the Sample

Of the 243 surveys distributed, 123 were returned, a 51% response rate. Although this was not high, it may still allow inferences to be made from this exploratory work. Of the respondents, 72% were employed by public institutions. The 123 institutions represented had an average of 190 full-time and 308 part-time MBA students. The mean number of years the MBA programs were in existence was 29. Mean student age was 28 years, and mean student work experience was 5 years. Mean advisor age was 43 years; 52% of the advisors were male, and mean length of time at the current job was 5 years. Academic rank (from lecturer to full professor) was held by 51% of the advisors. For 76% of the respondents, advising was a full-time position. They had worked in advising for approximately 8 years on average.

Questionnaire Analysis

All multiple-item scales used in this study were examined for internal consistency using Cronbach's alpha. For all scales, the alpha level met or exceeded .65 and was considered acceptable (Table 1). Next, the means and standard deviations for all measures were calculated. Given the magnitude of the standard deviation for the measure of number of MBA students in the program ($m = 497.80$, $s = 467.48$), the logarithm of that measure was substituted in subsequent analyses (Program Size). Interitem correlations were performed for all study variables (Table 1). Seven of the measures show significant relationships with Job Satisfaction. The strongest relationships were with Role Clarity and Student Orientation. This suggests that understanding the job and treating students as individuals were related to being more

TABLE 1
Intercorrelations of Study Variables

<i>Variable</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>3</i>	<i>4</i>	<i>5</i>	<i>6</i>	<i>7</i>	<i>8</i>	<i>9</i>	<i>10</i>	<i>11</i>	<i>12</i>
1. Job Satisfaction	5.02	.72	0.81(9)											
2. Role Clarity	4.87	1.26	0.52***	0.90(6)										
3. Role Conflict	3.81	1.27	-0.22**	-0.46***	0.84(7)									
4. Severity of Problems	2.09	.43	-0.12	-0.27**	0.27**	0.65(8)								
5. Advising Experience	8.02	6.27	0.17*	0.26**	-0.20*	-0.10	n/a							
6. Student Orientation	5.24	1.38	0.30***	0.16*	0.04	0.06	-0.02	n/a						
7. Frequency of Advice	3.16	.48	0.26**	0.21*	0.13	0.06	0.05	0.29***	0.70(9)					
8. Program Size	5.87	.83	-0.03	-0.06	0.09	-0.06	0.05	-0.07	-0.01	n/a				
9. Ethnic Diversity	3.96	1.56	0.14	0.10	-0.04	0.10	-0.01	0.05	0.05	0.01	n/a			
10. Technical Expertise	4.03	.84	0.00	0.16*	-0.06	0.00	0.12	0.04	0.24**	0.14	0.08	0.78(3)		
11. Creative Expertise	4.04	.72	0.24**	0.15*	0.09	0.11	0.09	0.29***	0.31***	0.11	0.10	0.61***	0.86(6)	
12. Work Status	.76	.43	0.27**	0.03	-0.02	-0.07	0.03	0.12	0.19*	0.31***	-0.04	0.17*	0.09	n/a

Note: Cronbach's alpha values are given on the diagonal, number of scale items in parentheses

n/a One-item measures, no alpha value

* $p < .05$

** $p < .01$

*** $p < .001$

satisfied on the job. Working full time and increased Advising Experience, Frequency of Advice, and Creative Expertise also were positively related to Job Satisfaction. The only significant negative correlation was with Role Conflict. Those experiencing more Role Conflict were less satisfied.

To understand more fully the relationships between these variables and to avoid overstating relationships due to multicollinearity, the research questions were assessed using regression analysis.

Tests of the Research Questions

To explore the impact of various student-related, program-related, and job-related factors on Job Satisfaction, a two-stage analysis was conducted. First, a stepwise regression analysis was conducted to see which variables might explain a significant amount of the variation in Job Satisfaction. Next, further regression analysis was conducted to clarify the findings of the first analysis. This provides a more complete understanding of the determinants of Job Satisfaction. In effect, all research questions are being tested simultaneously.

In the first analysis, Role Clarity entered the equation first followed by Work Status, Student Orientation, Technical Expertise, and Creative Expertise (Model $F(5,116) = 20.04$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .44$; see Table 2). The relationship of Role Clarity, Work Status, and Creative Expertise with Job Satisfaction was positive; the relationship between Technical Expertise and Job Satisfaction was negative. As a part of this regression analysis, a test was performed which revealed no outliers.

As Work Status was one of the five variables to enter the equation, further exploration was conducted. First, a simple t -test was conducted to compare the level of Job Satisfaction of full- and part-time advisors. This revealed that full-time advisors were significantly more satisfied than part-timers ($t = 2.53$, $df = 120$, $p < .05$). Given this difference between types of advisors, the sample was split. Two additional stepwise regressions were conducted to identify any differences in the models that fit these groups. In these analyses, two different models were identified. For full-timers the model included Role Clarity and Student Orientation, $F(2,90) = 27.29$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .36$. For part-timers the model included Role Clarity and Technical Expertise, $F(2,26) = 11.36$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .43$ (see Table 3). The relationships between the predictors and the dependent variable (Job Satisfaction) remained the same in terms of direction.

Discussion

This study revealed several interesting findings. First, Role Clarity had the strongest independent relationship with Job Satisfaction. This was not unexpected, given previous findings regarding this variable (e.g., House & Rizzo, 1972). Role Clarity seems to be a fairly critical element (explaining 28% of the variance) in the Job Satisfaction of an MBA advisor.

Work Status was the second variable to enter the equation. Full-time advisors were more satisfied than part-time advisors. Given the nature of the MBA advising task, this, too, is not surprising. Advising may be the type of job that is difficult on a part-time basis, especially when one has other

TABLE 2
Stepwise Regression Analysis Including All Study Variables

Step	Variable	Beta	R^2	R^2 Change	df	$F(\text{step})$
1	Role Clarity	.52	.28	.28	1,120	47.38***
2	Work Status	.26	.33	.05	1,119	11.11**
3	Student Orientation	.14	.38	.05	1,118	9.02**
4	Technical Expertise	-.34	.39	.01	1,117	3.98*
5	Creative Expertise	.31	.44	.05	1,116	11.39***

* $p < .05$

** $p < .01$

*** $p < .001$

TABLE 3
Stepwise Regression Analysis by Work Status

Full-time Advisors						
<i>Step</i>	<i>Variable</i>	<i>Beta</i>	<i>R²</i>	<i>R² Change</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>F(step)</i>
1	Role Clarity	.53	.31	.31	1,91	42.35***
2	Student Orientation	.25	.36	.05	1,90	8.67**
Part-time Advisors						
<i>Step</i>	<i>Variable</i>	<i>Beta</i>	<i>R²</i>	<i>R² Change</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>F(step)</i>
1	Role Clarity	.56	.26	.26	1,27	10.99**
2	Technical Expertise	-.42	.43	.17	1,26	8.63**

** $p < .01$

*** $p < .001$

important duties to perform for the university, forcing one to divide one's time.

Student Orientation entered third. The relationship between this variable and Job Satisfaction suggests that individuals who are inclined to treat their advisees as unique are more satisfied with their jobs. This may reveal something else about advisement. If "good" advisement requires an advisor to show individualized concern and the advisor is uncomfortable doing so, this may reduce Job Satisfaction. If advisor satisfaction is, in part, determined by advisee satisfaction, finding this relationship is not surprising.

The last two variables to enter had to do with understanding of the advising task. With Creative Expertise the relationship with Job Satisfaction was consistent with Student Orientation and Role Clarity. This may reveal that those with the best understanding of what they are to do creatively as advisors will tend to be the most satisfied with the job itself. It would stand to reason that those who understand what the job entails and do not appreciate that type of work would tend to leave the job, and those who remain would tend to be more satisfied. However, the relationship of Technical Expertise with Job Satisfaction was negative. That is, the higher the level of Technical Expertise, the lower that of Job Satisfaction. This is more difficult to explain. However, looking at the measure itself, the items having to do with the technical aspects of the job may have more to do with aspects of the system which deviate from treating the advisee as an individual. As such, a greater understanding of these aspects may actually have a somewhat dampening effect on advisors' enthusiasm in performing their jobs. Technical

Expertise accounts for only an additional 1% of the variance, so its contribution is not so great as that of Creative Expertise.

Having explored the sample as a whole, breaking the group down by Work Status offered additional information. Role Clarity continued to be the most critical variable in explaining Job Satisfaction. This again suggests that understanding the job makes a difference regardless of whether the advisor works part-or full-time. The second variable to enter the full-time equation pertained to the orientation of the advisor toward the individual. This suggests the importance of trying to solve student problems one at a time. If one is going to advise full time, one would seem to need to appreciate helping the individual. No other variables entered the full-time equation.

For part-time advisors, the second variable to enter was Technical Expertise. Again this variable revealed a negative relationship with Job Satisfaction, suggesting that perceiving the job in purely technical terms will be related to decreased Job Satisfaction. In this case, 17% of the variation in part-time advisor Job Satisfaction was explained by this variable. With part-time employees, knowing the technical part of the job may make the work more tedious, especially if the advisor does not appreciate the individual student. No other variables entered this equation.

Regarding variables that did not enter the equation, the fact that Role Conflict did not enter the equation seems somewhat unusual given the previous literature. However, looking at the mean for Role Conflict, it could be explained by the fact that Role Conflict was not perceived to be high on average. In addition, the fact that the correlation

of Role Conflict with Role Clarity was high ($r = -.46$) may explain why it did not enter the equation. The program-descriptive variables failed to enter the equation. As far as Program Size is concerned, perhaps larger programs have better systems for dealing with student demands, reducing pressure on the advisor. Also, larger programs are more likely to have full-time advisors (see Table 1); therefore the Work Status variable may better explain the difference. Ethnic Diversity was not significantly related to either Frequency of Advice or Severity of Problems (see Table 1). This may provide some explanation as to why this variable did not enter. Student-descriptive variables did not enter the equation. This may be explained by the fact that these elements reveal less about the individual's job or approach to the job than did the variables that entered the equation. Also, Severity of Problems and Frequency of Advice again revealed relatively low mean scores. All of the advisor variables except Advising Experience entered the equation. Advising Experience may not have entered because of its fairly strong relationship with Role Clarity. This suggests that Role Clarity is enhanced with time on the job and that clarity itself is the critical element.

Summary

The critical determinants of advisor Job Satisfaction appear to be job- and person-related. The evidence suggests that advisors with a better understanding of their job (with the exception of technical aspects) will be more satisfied. Also, full-time advisors are more satisfied. In addition, full-time advisors have different determinants of Job Satisfaction than do part-timers, although they share the importance of Role Clarity.

A strength of this research is its representativeness. This study involved an investigation of a good-sized sample from the population of MBA advisors at AACSB-accredited business schools. It also involved the use of a variety of explanatory measures in looking at Job Satisfaction. A potential weakness is in the exploratory nature of our work. However, as we believe it to be the first study of its type, we feel justified in using this approach. Another weakness is the size of the part-time advisor sample. There are 93 full-time advisors in this sample but only 29 part-timers. This may limit the degree to which the model derived for these individuals is a good fit. However, the results do indicate a difference between those of different Work Status.

Several implications for practice can be derived. First, advisors should have a clear understanding of their jobs. The importance of Role Clarity emerged regardless of whether the focus was on the sample as a whole or broken down by Work Status. This suggests that it would be worthwhile to spend additional time explaining to new advisors the scope of their tasks. The results also suggest that advisors should value the interpersonal relationships developed in the advising process. In choosing individuals for advising positions, the importance of their approach to advisees as individuals should be stressed. Finally, full-time advisors may be more satisfied than their part-time counterparts. Perhaps, part-time employees have divided loyalties and may even view the advising portion of their jobs as a burden. The fact that Technical Expertise has a negative impact on Job Satisfaction suggests that training employees to advise students in a mechanistic fashion may do more harm than good. Thus, this would seem to imply that full-time status would be desirable when employing an advisor, but efforts at job clarification and training may enhance the job satisfaction of part-time advisors. Program Size may have a bearing on the decision to make a full-time appointment. However, this would not appear to be the case in this study (see Table 1).

Further research should focus on answering questions raised in this study. Additional study of the impact of work status on satisfaction would be useful. Also, research should focus on the link between advisor satisfaction and extrarole activities (Organ, 1988). Finally, other types of advisors should be studied to see if these findings are generalizable.

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