

Exploring the impact of performance pressure on organizational career growth



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ABSTRACT

Organizational career growth involves both employees' efforts to achieve career goals and improve their skills, as well as the organization's support through promotions and salary increases. While career growth is linked to job satisfaction and commitment, the factors that shape it are not fully understood. This study explores how performance pressure influences organizational career growth, focusing on the mediating role of work engagement and the moderating role of promotion focus. Using survey data from 353 salespersons in China, the results show that performance pressure can promote career growth by increasing work engagement. However, this positive effect becomes weaker for individuals with a strong promotion focus. Promotion focus moderates both the direct link between performance pressure and work engagement and its indirect effect on career growth. Drawing on Conservation of Resources (COR) theory and Regulatory Focus Theory, the study demonstrates the dual impact of performance pressure and emphasizes the need to align performance expectations with employees' motivational tendencies. The findings provide practical guidance for managing performance demands while supporting career development, especially in high-pressure fields like sales.

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1. Introduction

Enterprises constantly face various challenges arising from the uncertainty of the economic environment (Chen and Xu, 2024), while employees also cope with the uncertainty and instability in their occupational environment (Zhu et al., 2024). Consequently, employees' inputs and outputs have become increasingly crucial for better coping with the ongoing changes in the labor market (Ingusci et al., 2019). However, in the Chinese context, the China Human Resource Management Annual Report shows that although employees' efforts and engagement have increased, their sense of organizational empowerment did not significantly improve in 2021. This is particularly evident in personal growth (training and development), which has declined by 1.32%. The report also indicates that the key factors

driving employee engagement are career development, autonomy, and performance management, with career development ranking first. Employees are eager to achieve self-enhancement and growth within the organization. In addition, according to the Resignation and Salary Adjustment Survey Report, 47.6% of companies implement differentiated salary adjustment policies based on performance evaluation results.

Jans (1989) introduced the concept of career prospects within an organization, emphasizing the assessments of promotion chances, future job satisfaction, and job retention opportunities. Later, Weng and McElroy (2012) suggested that organizational career growth can be viewed as a multi-dimensional concept that reflects how an individual perceives that their organization enables them to meet career-related needs and recognizes those achievements through promotions and compensation. Specifically, this includes individual efforts towards personal career goals and skill acquisition, and the organization's efforts for promotions and salary increases (van Osch and Schaveling, 2020; Weer and Greenhaus, 2020).

Additionally, employees' career growth involves individuals developing new skills and capabilities,

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taking on new responsibilities, and assuming enriched job roles (Wang et al., 2021), and it also implies applying more emotions and accepting more challenges (Ge et al., 2022). It is reported that learning and development opportunities and clear career advancement opportunities, and processes are consistently among the factors that make a job sticky. Employees who perceive and experience career growth within the organization are more likely to exhibit more substantial organizational commitment (Al Balushi et al., 2022), higher job satisfaction (Ashraf, 2019), and lower turnover intentions (Amah and Oyetuunde, 2020). Therefore, organizational career growth has been highly discussed, attracting significant scholarly attention and debate (Weng and Zhu, 2020).

Although some factors, such as work seniority (Liu et al., 2015), core self-evaluation (da Motta Veiga, 2015), knowledge and professional values (Aggari et al., 2020), and personality traits (Jiang et al., 2021; Ma et al., 2024; Zhu and Gao, 2024), have been identified as essential antecedents of organizational career growth, research on contextual factors influencing organizational career growth is relatively insufficient (Miao et al., 2023). Meanwhile, existing studies on organizational career growth have primarily concentrated on populations such as nurses (Aggari et al., 2020; Yang et al., 2015), teachers (Ogbuanya and Yekinni, 2022), hotel employees (Faiz et al., 2022; Yoopetch et al., 2021), postdoctoral researchers (Li et al., 2024), and new-generation migrant workers (Zheng, 2024), while literature related to the sales industry remains limited. In addition, existing research on organizational career growth needs to establish theories that integrate multiple theoretical perspectives to better understand various relationships (Weng and Zhu, 2020). More focus should be placed on well-established mediating mechanisms, as the intervening processes leading to career growth have not received sufficient scholarly attention or understanding (Modem et al., 2022).

Specifically, this study focuses on the organizational career growth of salespersons in China. Sales positions consistently rank high on recruitment demand lists. Salespersons are crucial in expanding markets and attracting customers, serving as key players in corporate management and development (Coimbra and Proença, 2023; Yoon et al., 2020). Additionally, the sales force is a critical driver of organic growth for the company (Skiba et al., 2019). However, they are also often mentioned alongside factors such as low entry barriers and high-performance pressure in the workplace. Moreover, the sales industry is filled with performance pressure, and salespersons are more likely to face significant challenges in achieving sales targets (Brown et al., 2022).

Performance pressure refers to employees' internal pressure due to the urgency to improve performance levels, as their performance efforts are closely scrutinized and tied to significant consequences (Mitchell et al., 2018). It represents a

unique source of work stress and is often seen as a double-edged sword. It has the potential to be perceived as a threat, leading to self-regulation depletion, or as a challenge, stimulating engagement (Mitchell et al., 2019). For example, high-performance pressure may trigger workplace cheating behavior (Mitchell et al., 2018) or lead to emotional exhaustion, which in turn promotes service sabotage behavior (Zhan and Su, 2025). Meanwhile, it may also fuel engagement (Kundi et al., 2022) and productive behavior (Mitchell et al., 2019).

Accordingly, this study integrates the COR theory and Regulatory focus theory to investigate the underlying impact mechanism of performance pressure on organizational career growth among salespersons. It examines the moderating role of promotion focus. The study aims to provide an understanding of the mediation and interaction mechanisms of organizational career growth, as well as the resource gain path of performance pressure, offering potentially valuable insights and recommendations for corporate management practices or individual career growth.

2. Theoretical background and hypotheses development

2.1. Performance pressure, work engagement, and organizational career growth

The COR theory posits that individuals strive to obtain, retain, foster, and protect resources they value. It emphasizes a cognitive bias toward resource loss, often outweighing the perceived value of resource gain. Under stress, individuals use key resources to cope and build reserves for future needs (Hobfoll, 1989). More specifically, the theory suggests that stress may trigger a resource loss spiral, potentially leading to secondary losses. In such cases, individuals may respond by redeploying coping strategies based on anticipated outcomes, seeking support, or passively waiting for the stressor to disappear. Additionally, according to the gain paradox principle, the fewer resources individuals possess, the more valuable and urgent it becomes to replenish and augment new ones. In other words, the fewer resources an individual already has, the more critical it is to infuse and add resources to alleviate their tension and stress (Hobfoll, 2001; Hobfoll et al., 2018).

As previously mentioned, performance pressure is a double-edged sword (Mitchell et al., 2019), but this study primarily considers it a challenging stressor for salespersons, highlighting its positive effects. For example, challenging stressors are often conducive to enhancing work engagement (Al Hajj et al., 2023). When experiencing performance pressure, salespersons may believe that their efforts can influence outcomes, which in turn activates positive coping strategies. Such responses can promote personal growth and motivate employees to apply their knowledge and skills to tackle work-related

challenges. Empirical evidence further supports the multifaceted impact of performance pressure: it is directly associated with self-objectification and workplace anxiety and indirectly influences in-role behaviors (Xu et al., 2021). It also shows positive associations with positive emotions, work well-being, and employee creativity under creative pressure conditions (Kundi et al., 2022).

Work engagement, in turn, reflects how individuals invest themselves in their roles. Kahn (1990) defined it as the physical, cognitive, and emotional aspects and involving active and full-role performance. Later, Macey and Schneider (2008) described it as a desirable condition with an organizational focus characterized by involvement, passion, enthusiasm, and energy. Schaufeli et al. (2002) offered one of the most widely cited definitions, framing work engagement as a persistent affective-cognitive state marked by three core components: vigor, dedication, and absorption. Specifically, vigor refers to high energy, mental resilience at work, and the willingness to invest effort. A sense of significance, enthusiasm, inspiration, pride, and challenge mark dedication. Absorption involves full concentration and enjoyment in work, where time passes quickly, and one feels deeply immersed (Schaufeli et al., 2006; Schaufeli et al., 2002).

Furthermore, highly engaged employees are more likely to create positive work environments and relationships (Nanayakkara and Sangarandeniya, 2021). This, in turn, enhances their productivity and efficiency, which are crucial for individual performance and organizational development (Kashyap et al., 2022; Rahi, 2022). Therefore, in line with COR theory, when salespersons experience performance pressure, they may perceive it as an opportunity for development and increase their work engagement to acquire valuable job resources. It suggests that under stress, individuals redeploy coping styles and actively invest in and acquire resources (Hobfoll et al., 2018). This sense of urgency may drive deeper focus and full engagement in task completion (Mangi et al., 2025).

For example, higher levels of performance pressure are associated with increased work engagement among employees. This relationship is further explained by challenge appraisal, through which performance pressure positively influences work engagement (Kundi et al., 2022). In a similar vein, performance pressure has also been found to positively impact employees' thriving at work and their job crafting. Hence, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H1. There is a positive relationship between performance pressure and work engagement.

Drawing on COR theory, individuals use key resources to manage stress in their current environment and respond to potential future stressors by actively building and safeguarding their

existing resource reserves. This is further reflected in the principle of resource investment. That is, when faced with stress, individuals can continuously invest in resources to facilitate quick recovery and acquire new resources. Therefore, work engagement can be seen as an effective resource investment and an important coping mechanism. This can stimulate the resource gain spiral, where individuals with more significant resources are less vulnerable to resource loss and more capable of gaining additional resources (Hobfoll et al., 2018).

At the same time, employees' work engagement is typically closely related to their growth climate (Rahmadani et al., 2022) and the strength of their growth needs (Li et al., 2022). Meanwhile, engaged employees are usually more satisfied with their jobs and work more effectively. Salespersons with high work engagement are more motivated to pursue organizational career growth, viewing it as a valuable job resource (Son and Kim, 2021; Weng and Zhu, 2020). Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H2. There is a positive relationship between work engagement and organizational career growth

Furthermore, to some extent, individuals' behavior is influenced by their resource surplus status, and the resources in the work environment influence employee engagement (Sekhar et al., 2018). They will engage in more resource-investment behavior if they perceive resources as abundant (Hobfoll, 2001). If a person is resourceful, they are more resilient. The reason is that they may invest resources to stop "secondary losses" after chronic or acute losses. Therefore, when salespersons face performance pressure, they are more inclined to promote organizational career growth by increasing resource investment behaviors, such as work engagement. This may give them more opportunities to expand their reservoir of ideas and actions, thereby enriching their resource pool.

In other words, work engagement is a motivational process designed to mobilize employees' efforts to focus on role performance, often exceeding established responsibilities (Panda et al., 2022; Reissová and Papay, 2021). It can be viewed as a motivational framework designed to improve performance outcomes by enhancing commitment to work (Abukhalifa et al., 2024). Specifically, engaged employees often devote more energy to their job roles. This may lead to increased work intensity and improved performance (Bailey et al., 2017). The more employees invest, the more likely they are to access additional organizational resources. Thus, this leads to the following hypothesis:

H3. Work engagement mediates the positive relationship between performance pressure and organizational career growth.

2.2. The moderating role of promotion focus

According to Higgins et al. (1997), regulatory focus theory primarily describes two self-regulation systems: promotion focus and prevention focus. A promotion focus prioritizes self-actualization and growth, with individuals taking risks and investing time and resources to achieve positive outcomes. In contrast, prevention focuses on duties and safety, using cautious strategies to avoid negative outcomes and maintain the status quo. Meanwhile, individuals may experience strong motivation from both regulatory systems, weak motivation from both, or have a stronger inclination toward one focus over the other (Brockner and Higgins, 2001). In line with the objectives, this study examines explicitly how salespersons' promotion focus moderates the relationship between performance pressure and work engagement and the mediating effects of work engagement on the relationship between performance pressure and organizational career growth. In challenging stress environments, promotion focus is often positively related to performance (Byron et al., 2018), as employees with a promotion focus tend to exhibit a more proactive attitude, leading to better work outcomes, such as work engagement (Kim et al., 2020).

Despite its generally positive role, this study proposes that promotion focus may weaken, rather than strengthen, the positive relationship between performance pressure and work engagement. Individuals with high promotion focus tend to be overcommitted to achieving ambitious goals, especially under demanding conditions. This overcommitment leads to rapid and intense resource investment, which can result in faster resource depletion. When resources are depleted and not sufficiently replenished, sustained work engagement becomes difficult to maintain. As COR theory suggests, resource gain is often slower and less impactful than resource loss, making the imbalance even more pronounced (Hobfoll et al., 2018). Moreover, regulatory focus theory highlights that promotion-focused individuals are especially sensitive to discrepancies between their actual and ideal outcomes (Higgins et al., 1997). Under high-performance pressure, if these individuals perceive that their goal attainment is at risk, they may experience frustration, stress, and emotional exhaustion. Rather than buffering stress, promotion focus on this context can intensify the emotional cost of unmet expectations, thereby reducing engagement.

Therefore, although promotion focus typically fosters proactive behavior, under high performance pressure, it may paradoxically undermine sustained work engagement due to accelerated resource consumption and increased sensitivity to failure. This weakens the positive impact of performance pressure on work engagement, particularly when promotion focus is high. This mechanism also extends to the indirect pathway between performance pressure and organizational career

growth via work engagement. When engagement is weakened, the positive mediating role it plays in translating performance pressure into organizational career growth is also diminished. This reflects a moderated mediation process, where promotion focus influences both the direct and indirect relationships between variables. Such an integrated perspective aligns with COR theory's emphasis on resource investment patterns and with methodological recommendations to examine moderating effects on complete mediation processes rather than isolated path segments (Hair et al., 2021; Hayes, 2018). This interpretation is also supported by prior studies. For instance, performance pressure can be viewed as either a threat or a challenge. When individuals perceive high-performance demands as opportunities for organizational and personal growth, they are more likely to focus on achieving goals (Kundi et al., 2022; Mitchell et al., 2019). Additionally, promotion focus has positively influenced work engagement (Alamri, 2023; Jason and SN, 2021). However, a higher promotion focus does not necessarily lead to a stronger positive relationship between performance pressure and work engagement. This is because, under high promotion focus, excessive resource desperation and the slow resource gain spiral may be inevitable.

In summary, this research proposes that the resource depletion associated with high promotion focus will weaken the overall indirect effect of performance pressure on organizational career growth through work engagement. This moderate mediation relationship suggests that the beneficial impact of performance pressure on organizational career growth through enhanced work engagement may be less pronounced for salespersons with a high promotion focus, as their accelerated resource consumption undermines the sustainability of this pathway. Similarly, promotion focus, as an important individual trait, often plays a moderating role in various relationships. For example, promotion focus moderates the relationship between humble leadership and thriving at work (Huang et al., 2024), as well as the relationship between job resources and motivational outcomes (e.g., affective commitment and job satisfaction) (Jing et al., 2024). Hence, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H4a. Promotion focus moderates the direct relationship between performance pressure and work engagement, such that promotion focus weakens the positive relationship between performance pressure and work engagement.

H4b. Promotion focus moderates the mediating effects of work engagement on the relationship between performance pressure and organizational career growth, such that the mediating effect of performance pressure on organizational career growth through work engagement is weaker when promotion focus is high.

The overall research framework and proposed hypotheses are illustrated in Fig. 1.

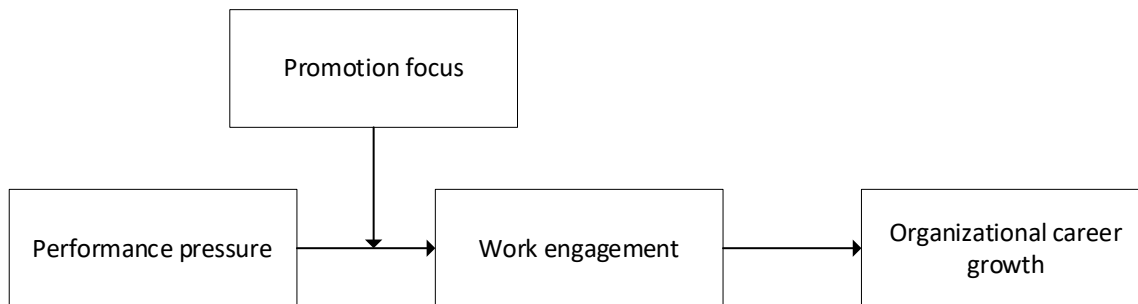


Fig. 1: The conceptual framework

3. Methods

3.1. Research design, participants, and procedure

This study employed a quantitative research design and a non-probability sampling strategy, explicitly applying the purposive sampling technique. A cross-sectional survey design was adopted, in which data were collected from the target sample at a single point in time. This design is considered time-efficient, cost-effective, and free from follow-up loss (Mohajan, 2020). Given practical constraints related to time, cost, and administrative ease, the cross-sectional approach is an appropriate and widely adopted method for this type of research. This method involves deliberately selecting participants based on their characteristics (Etikan et al., 2016). To ensure that only relevant participants were included, the first question of the questionnaire asked whether the participant was currently in a sales position. If “Yes” was selected, the participant could proceed to complete the full questionnaire; if “No” was selected, the questionnaire ended immediately. The questionnaire was distributed via the online platform “Wenjuanxing,” which offers advantages such as conducting surveys quickly and cost-effectively and tracking real-time progress. The survey link was distributed to potential participants via WeChat. The questionnaire was primarily distributed to sales companies in the fast-moving consumer goods, medical supplies, and real estate sectors. Upon completing the questionnaire, participants could win an online monetary incentive, as small, prepaid monetary incentives have been shown to increase survey response rates (Biemer et al., 2018).

3.2. Measures

Performance pressure: Performance pressure was measured using a four-item scale developed by Mitchell et al. (2018). This scale has demonstrated good validity and reliability in the context of China (Liu et al., 2022). Sample items include “I feel tremendous pressure to produce results” and “I would characterize my workplace as a results-driven environment” ($\alpha = 0.837$). All items were rated on a five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree). **Work engagement:** Work engagement was measured using the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES), which was developed by

Schaufeli et al. (2006). It comprises three dimensions with nine items. The scale has demonstrated good validity and reliability across different populations in China (Fong and Ng, 2012; Guo et al., 2017; Wu et al., 2023). Sample items include “At my work, I feel bursting with energy” and “I feel happy when I am working intensely” ($\alpha = 0.96$). All items utilized a seven-point response scale, ranging from “never” (0) to “always” (6). This scale is the most widely used instrument in work engagement studies and is considered a standard measurement tool (Junça Silva and Lopes, 2023; Kulikowski, 2017).

Organizational career growth: Organizational career growth was measured using four dimensions and 15 items. The scale was developed by Weng et al. (2010), and the Chinese version was further refined by Weng and Xi (2011). It has been consistently cited and validated, particularly in the Chinese context (Cheng et al., 2024; Miao et al., 2023; Jia-Jun and Hua-Ming, 2022). It includes career goal progress, professional ability development, promotion speed, and remuneration growth. Sample items include “My present job moves me closer to my career goals” and “My present job enables me to continuously improve my professional capabilities” ($\alpha = 0.949$). All items were rated on a five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree and 5 = strongly agree).

Promotion focus: Promotion focus was measured using a 9-item scale developed by Lockwood et al. (2002). Items such as “I frequently imagine how I will achieve my hopes and aspirations” and “I typically focus on the success I hope to achieve in the future” ($\alpha = 0.945$). All items were rated on a five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree). This scale has demonstrated good validity and reliability in the context of China (Jing et al., 2024).

Control variables: Following previous studies, age, gender, tenure, educational level, organization type, and position were employed as control variables (Chen and Xu, 2024; Li et al., 2024; Liu et al., 2015).

4. Results

SPSS 28.0 and SmartPLS 4 were employed to conduct the statistical analysis for this study. SPSS is a key tool for quantitative data analysis, while PLS-SEM offers benefits such as handling non-normal data, small sample sizes, formative indicators, and complex models (Hair et al., 2017; Hair et al., 2014).

4.1. Descriptive statistics

Three hundred fifty-three complete and valid questionnaire responses were collected (Table 1). Among the respondents, 52.1% were male and 47.9% were female, with nearly equal proportions. Most salespeople were aged between 26 and 40 years, accounting for a cumulative 64.9%. Regarding educational background, most salespersons had higher education, with 57.3% holding a bachelor's degree or higher. Additionally, in terms of organizational affiliation, most salespersons (50.7%) were from private enterprises. Concerning tenure at the current organization, 21.5% had worked for 1 to 3 years, while 25.8% had worked for over 10 years, showing relatively similar proportions. Approximately 35% of the salespeople held junior or higher-level managerial positions within their organizations.

Table 1: Respondents' demographic profiles

Demographics	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Sex		
Male	184	52.1
Female	169	47.9
Age		
≤ 25 years	35	9.9
26-30	80	22.7
31-35	80	22.7
36-40	69	19.5
41-45	41	11.6
46-50	22	6.2
≥ 51 years	26	7.4
Educational level		
Junior high school or below	27	7.6
High school/vocational school/technical school	64	18.1
Diploma	60	17.0
Bachelor's degree	152	43.1
Master's degree and above	50	14.2
Organization type		
State-owned or state-holding	61	17.3
Private	179	50.7
Foreign funded	41	11.6
Others	72	20.4
Organizational tenure		
≤ 1 year	43	12.2
1-3 years (including 3)	76	21.5
3-5 years (including 5)	55	15.6
5-7 years (including 7)	52	14.7
7-10 years (including 10)	36	10.2
> 10 years	91	25.8
Position		
Staff	230	65.2
Junior manager	64	18.1
Mid-level manager	44	12.5
Senior-level manager	15	4.2
Total (N)	353	

Table 2 shows the means, standard deviations, and bivariate correlations among the variables. Performance pressure is positively correlated with work engagement ($r = .610, p < .01$), organizational career growth ($r = .585, p < .01$), and promotion focus ($r = .137, p < .05$). Work engagement shows a strong positive correlation with organizational career growth ($r = .876, p < .01$) and promotion focus ($r = .292, p < .01$). Organizational career growth is positively correlated with promotion focus ($r = .334, p < .01$). Additionally, position is positively

correlated with organizational career growth ($r = .139, p < .01$) and work engagement ($r = .125, p < .05$). The anonymity of the questionnaire was emphasized both in the introduction and the instructions upon distribution to minimize common method bias, and scales with different endpoints were used (MacKenzie and Podsakoff, 2012). Harman's single-factor test showed that the first extracted factor explains 45.22% of the variance, which is below the 50% threshold (Aguirre-Urreta and Hu, 2019; Fernando and Jayawardana, 2024). Furthermore, all indicators' variance inflation factors (VIF) values did not exceed 5, indicating no multicollinearity (Hair et al., 2011).

4.2. Measurement model

As shown in Table 3, all variables have a Cronbach's alpha (α) value greater than 0.8, which is generally considered optimal as values between 0.7 and 0.9 are deemed appropriate (Creswell and Creswell, 2017). The composite reliability (CR) values exceed 0.8, which indicates strong measurement validity, with the threshold typically set at 0.6 or above. All variables have an average variance extracted (AVE) value greater than 0.5, meeting the requirement for convergent validity (Hair et al., 2019). Regarding discriminant validity, the Heterotrait-Monotrait correlation ratio (HTMT) of 0.85 was used as the benchmark. Except for the HTMT value of 0.917 for work engagement and organizational career growth, the HTMT values for other variables were well below the critical threshold of 0.85 (Hair et al., 2019). Furthermore, calculations were performed using the bootstrapping technique. Through this process, discriminant validity was assessed via the values of the confidence intervals. The results show that none of the confidence intervals included "1." Therefore, the variables used in this study still satisfied the standard for discriminant validity (Henseler et al., 2015; Mohd Dzin and Lay, 2021).

4.3. Structural model

Table 4 presents the results of the direct hypotheses tested in this study. Performance pressure significantly impacts work engagement ($\beta = 0.534, T = 11.356, P = 0.000$), and work engagement significantly positively affects organizational career growth ($\beta = 0.833, T = 23.243, P = 0.000$). Thus, H1 and H2 are supported. Regarding the mediation analysis (Table 5), the results without the mediator show that performance pressure significantly positively affects organizational career growth ($\beta = 0.594, T = 14.437, P = 0.000$). However, when the mediator is included, the direct effect of performance pressure on organizational career growth is not significant ($\beta = 0.078, T = 1.913, P = 0.056$). The assessment of mediation was based on the "variance accounted for" (VAF) principle, which assesses the size of the indirect effect relative to the total effect (Ali and Park, 2016). The following criteria were

applied: VAF > 80% indicates full mediation, 20% ≤ VAF < 80% indicates partial mediation, and VAF < 20% indicates no mediation (Bari et al., 2016; Bari et al., 2022). Accordingly, the indirect and total effects

of performance pressure on organizational career growth were computed, yielding a VAF value of 85.25%. This supports the conclusion of full mediation. Therefore, H3 was supported.

Table 2: Means, standard deviations (SD), and correlation coefficients

Variable	Mean	SD	Sex	Age	Educational level	Organization type	Organizational tenure	Position	PP	WE	OCG
Sex	--	--	--								
Age	3.48	1.67	0.08	--							
Educational level	3.38	1.16	-	-	--						
Organization type	2.35	0.99	.172**	.286**	--						
Organizational tenure	--	--	-0.02	.560**	0.04	0.03	--				
Position	1.56	0.87	-.133*	.113*	0.07	-.106*	.181**	--			
PP	3.67	0.89	-0.09	0.01	.198**	-0.05	0.10	0.04	--		
WE	4.85	1.39	0.02	0.09	0.09	0.02	0.10	.125*	.610**	--	
OCG	3.61	0.83	-0.03	0.03	0.07	0.01	0.09	.139**	.585**	.876**	--
PF	3.52	0.98	-0.05	0.01	0.05	-0.05	.204**	0.03	.137*	.292**	.334**

N = 353; *: p < .05; **: p < .01; PP: Performance pressure; WE: Work engagement; OCG: Organizational career growth; PF: Promotion focus Sex (1= male, 2= female); Age (1= 25 years or younger, 2= 26-30 years, 3= 31-35 years, 4= 36-40 years, 5= 41-45 years, 6= 46-50 years, 7= 51 years or older); Educational level (1= High school/vocational school/technical school, 2= Diploma, 3= Bachelor's degree, 4= Master's degree and above); Organization type (1= State-owned or State-holding, 2= Private, 3= Foreign-funded, 4= Others); Organizational tenure (1= One year or less, 2= 1-3 years, 3= 3-5 years, 4=5-7 years, 5= 7-10 years, 6= Over 10 years); Position (1= Staff, 2= Junior manager, 3= Mid-level manager, 4= Senior-level manager)

Table 3: Reliability and validity of the measurement model

Variable	Items	Loadings	α	CR	AVE
PP	PP1	0.814	0.837	0.891	0.672
	PP2	0.840			
	PP3	0.791			
	PP4	0.831			
WE	WE1	0.850	0.960	0.966	0.759
	WE2	0.880			
	WE3	0.874			
	WE4	0.876			
	WE5	0.884			
	WE6	0.864			
	WE7	0.886			
	WE8	0.868			
	WE9	0.857			
OCG	OCG1	0.770	0.949	0.955	0.584
	OCG2	0.766			
	OCG3	0.729			
	OCG4	0.748			
	OCG5	0.748			
	OCG6	0.729			
	OCG7	0.758			
	OCG8	0.771			
	OCG9	0.793			
	OCG10	0.795			
	OCG11	0.813			
	OCG12	0.764			
	OCG13	0.802			
	OCG14	0.727			
	OCG15	0.743			
PF	PF1	0.844	0.945	0.953	0.694
	PF2	0.850			
	PF3	0.862			
	PF4	0.860			
	PF5	0.841			
	PF6	0.819			
	PF7	0.851			
	PF8	0.759			
	PF9	0.803			

α: Cronbach's alpha; CR: Composite reliability; AVE: Average variance extracted

Table 4: PLS-SEM analysis results of direct effects

Paths	Path coefficient	Sample mean	SD	T-statistics	P-values	Decision
PP -> WE	0.534	0.536	0.047	11.356	0.000	H1 Supported
WE -> OCG	0.833	0.834	0.036	23.243	0.000	H2 Supported

Significant at the 0.05 level (two-tailed)

Table 5: Analysis of the mediation

Paths	Indirect effect (T-statistics)	Total effect (T-statistics)	VAF (%)	Interpretation	Decision
PP -> WE -> OCG	0.445 (9.866)	0.522 (11.716)	0.852	Full mediation	H3 Supported

Significant at the 0.05 level (two-tailed)

Table 6 reports the results of the moderation analysis. The interaction between performance pressure and promotion focus was significantly associated with work engagement ($\beta = -0.340$, $T = 5.199$, $P = 0.000$, $CI: [-0.467, -0.212]$). This indicates that the effect of performance pressure on work engagement weakens at higher levels of promotion focus. H4a was supported. Bootstrapping is typically employed to construct asymmetric confidence intervals, while the first- and second-order multivariate delta method is used to derive standard errors and construct confidence intervals. These methods are commonly used to estimate and determine the significance of conditional indirect effects (Preacher et al., 2007). Accordingly, Table 6

also presents results for the conditional indirect effect of performance pressure on organizational career growth through work engagement at high and low values (± 1 SD from the mean) of promotion focus. The indirect effect of performance pressure on organizational career growth through work engagement was stronger at a low level of promotion focus ($\beta = 0.576$, $T = 11.587$, $P = 0.000$, $CI: [0.486, 0.682]$). It was weaker at a high level of promotion focus ($\beta = 0.246$, $T = 3.704$, $P = 0.000$, $CI: [0.122, 0.382]$). To further verify whether promotion focus moderates this indirect effect, the bootstrapped confidence interval for the moderated mediation was tested ($\beta = -0.169$, $T = 5.046$, $P = 0.000$, $CI: [-0.237, -0.105]$). Therefore, H4b was supported.

Table 6: Analysis of the moderation

Paths	Path Coefficient	Sample mean	SD	T-statistics	P-values	LLCI	ULCI	Decision
PF x PP -> WE	-0.340	-0.338	0.065	5.199	0.000	-0.467	-0.212	H4a Supported
Low PF (mean-1SD)	0.576	0.580	0.050	11.587	0.000	0.486	0.682	H4b Supported
Average PF (mean)	0.411	0.415	0.048	8.589	0.000	0.322	0.510	
High PF (mean+1SD)	0.246	0.250	0.066	3.704	0.000	0.122	0.382	
PF x PP -> OCG	-0.169	-0.169	0.033	5.046	0.000	-0.237	-0.105	

Significant at the 0.05 level (two-tailed)

In the structural model, all control variables were retained to ensure consistency with prior research and to account for potential confounding influences (Becker et al., 2016). Among these variables, age had a small but significant negative effect on organizational career growth ($\beta = -0.089$, $T = 2.749$, $P = 0.006$). In contrast, other control variables, including gender, tenure, educational level, organization type, and position, did not show significant effects.

5. Discussion

As mentioned earlier, career growth has become a primary consideration in individuals' career choices and intentions to stay (Vande Griek et al., 2020). Consequently, individuals in organizations often seek additional opportunities and potential promotions due to a strong aspiration for career growth. They may consider moving to other organizations without opportunities for personal career development (Ni et al., 2022; Weer and Greenhaus, 2020). Drawing on COR theory and regulatory focus theory, this study developed a theoretical framework to explain how and when performance pressure leads to organizational career growth. Performance pressure is often regarded as a double-edged sword (Mitchell et al., 2019). However, it plays a positive role in this study, consistent with previous research (Kundi et al., 2022; Xu et al., 2021).

Specifically, after examining this model using cross-sectional data collected from 353 salespersons, the results indicate that performance pressure significantly positively affects work engagement.

This further confirms that the sense of urgency brought about by pressure may drive individuals to invest more, thereby increasing work engagement (Mangi et al., 2025). Performance pressure positively stimulated work engagement for full-time employees from various industries in China. This finding is consistent with Kundi et al. (2022), who reported that performance pressure positively affects work engagement among white-collar employees in different sectors in France. This also aligns with the COR theory, which posits that individuals facing stress adjust their coping strategies and accelerate the investment and acquisition of resources (Hobfoll et al., 2018). However, it is also important to note that pressure, as a typical job demand, can sometimes be associated with lower levels of work engagement (Breugh, 2021).

The findings reveal that work engagement significantly affects organizational career growth and mediates the relationship between performance pressure and organizational career growth. According to Dan et al. (2020), highly engaged individuals experience more positive emotions, leading to shifts in thinking and behavior, which improve performance outcomes. Additionally, abundant resources may motivate them to engage in more resource-investment behavior, and the resources owned by individuals do not exist independently (Hobfoll, 2001; Hobfoll et al., 2018).

Notably, promotion focus moderates the relationship between performance pressure and work engagement and between performance pressure and organizational career growth. In particular, the direct relationship between performance pressure and work engagement

weakens when salespersons exhibit high promotion focus. Similarly, the indirect relationship between performance pressure and organizational career growth through work engagement is weaker when salespersons exhibit high levels of promotion focus. Some previous studies have supported the positive role of promotion focus, such as its ability to enhance performance (Byron et al., 2018; Petrou et al., 2017), work engagement (Alamri, 2023; Kim et al., 2020), and employee creativity (Lang et al., 2022). Similarly, promotion focus has been shown to moderate the relationship between message transparency and knowledge sharing (Chen et al., 2020) and the relationship between transformational leadership and creative behavior at high levels (Chang and Teng, 2017). However, this study reveals how including promotion focus brings more attention to its “potentially negative” impact. Regarding the control variables, only “age” showed a slightly negative impact on organizational career growth, which is like a previous study (Liu et al., 2015) but differs from some other studies (Chen and Xu, 2024; Xie et al., 2020). However, their inclusion is meaningful for a more comprehensive understanding of the relationship between independent and dependent variables (Becker et al., 2016).

5.1. Theoretical implications

This research makes three theoretical contributions. Firstly, while previous studies may have focused on exploring how certain factors at the individual or organizational level impact organizational career growth (Wang and Abu Hasan, 2024), this study concentrates on performance pressure as a distinct source of stress (Mitchell et al., 2019).

Secondly, by integrating the COR and regulatory focus theories, this research has developed a moderated mediation model linking performance pressure to organizational career growth, with work engagement as the mediator and promotion focus as the moderator. This model explains how and when performance pressure leads to organizational career growth, broadening the understanding of the intervening processes leading to career growth (Modem et al., 2022; Weng and Zhu, 2020).

Thirdly, this study explores and supports both the loss spiral and gain spiral paths proposed in the COR theory. When performance pressure is viewed as a motivational force, it encourages individuals to increase work engagement and invest more resources, triggering a gain spiral. This process ultimately contributes to organizational career growth. Additionally, promotion focus is one of the essential personality traits (Lanaj et al., 2012), and individuals with high promotion focus may pursue goal attainment more directly, which accelerates resource consumption. This, in turn, can result in a decline in work engagement, ultimately hindering organizational career growth.

5.2. Practical implications

Performance pressure is almost inevitable (Brown et al., 2022; Kundi et al., 2022), particularly as a unique stressor, and its impact on organizational career growth deserves attention. The findings of this study primarily provide practical implications in two aspects. Firstly, the results show that performance pressure generally leads to positive outcomes among salespersons, such as increased work engagement, thereby facilitating favorable organizational career growth. However, for employees with a high promotion focus, excessive performance pressure may result in overinvestment of personal resources, leading to depletion (Hobfoll et al., 2018). This, in turn, reduces work engagement and impacts organizational career growth. Notably, sustained high performance pressure has also been demonstrated to affect productive behavior negatively (Mitchell et al., 2019) and work well-being. Therefore, when setting performance goals, managers should adopt a more personalized approach rather than applying uniform targets across all employees. For example, given that regulatory focus meaningfully influences work outcomes and is not redundant with other individual traits, managers may implement tiered or flexible performance targets tailored to employees' motivational profiles (Lanaj et al., 2012). In addition, considering employees' personality traits can help managers set performance goals that support more effective resource allocation. When such personalized goals are combined with adequate resource support, employee motivation may be further enhanced (Lyu and Luo, 2024). Furthermore, sufficient career development resources from organizations can encourage employees to invest greater focus and effort in their tasks, thereby promoting career growth (Ni et al., 2025).

Secondly, this study shows that when salespersons have an excessively high promotion focus, it can weaken the direct positive effect of performance pressure on work engagement. It can also attenuate the positive mediating effect of work engagement on organizational career growth through performance pressure. Previous studies have demonstrated that different appraisals of performance pressure can influence work engagement (Kundi et al., 2022) and that the relationship between pressure and engagement is not always consistent (Deng et al., 2021; Pérez-Fuentes et al., 2018). For example, the positive relationship between performance pressure and work engagement is enhanced by job control. In today's increasingly competitive business landscape, organizations that can effectively manage performance pressure while accounting for individual differences in regulatory focus will be better positioned to foster employee engagement and sustainable career growth. Therefore, managers should pay attention to employees' personality traits during the recruitment process and provide

employees with more appropriate resources based on specific performance goals.

5.3. Limitations and future research directions

Despite these contributions, several limitations should be considered when interpreting the results of this research. The cross-sectional approach limits the ability to establish causal relationships between the examined variables. Future studies employing experimental methodologies or longitudinal designs would be beneficial for verifying the current observations. Similarly, extending this line of inquiry to diverse demographic populations and geographical settings would enhance the findings' external validity and broader applicability. Meanwhile, a self-report format was used in the questionnaire because employees have more opportunities than colleagues or supervisors to observe their own behaviors (Koopmans et al., 2014). This method also facilitates data collection and helps ensure confidentiality. However, self-reporting may introduce social desirability bias. Future research could incorporate multi-source data to improve the reliability and objectivity of the findings. In addition, a complex relationship may exist among work stress, work engagement, and organizational career growth. Specifically, this study demonstrates that performance pressure significantly affects organizational career growth by influencing work engagement. In contrast, recent studies have found that organizational career growth can also positively predict work stress (Ogbuanya and Yekinni, 2022) and acts as a mediator between thriving at work and both eustress and distress (Faiz et al., 2022). Furthermore, prior research has shown that organizational career growth positively influences employee engagement among younger employees and public health workers (Okon et al., 2025). Moreover, it is crucial to acknowledge the potential "dark side" of organizational career growth and its negative influencing factors (Wang and Abu Hasan, 2024). The findings show that a high promotion focus amplifies the adverse effects of performance pressure on organizational career growth. Further investigation is warranted into the antecedents and organizational career growth. Despite these limitations, the findings provide valuable insights into the interplay between performance pressure, work engagement, and organizational career growth that can inform theory development and management practice.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, this study enhances understanding of the COR theory's resource gain and resource loss spirals and their interaction with regulatory focus theory. Findings indicate that the impact of performance pressure on organizational career growth is not always consistent. Specifically, performance pressure may positively influence organizational career growth by enhancing

individuals' work engagement. This research extends previous theoretical frameworks by identifying promotion focus as a critical boundary condition in the performance pressure-organizational career growth relationship. It offers a more nuanced understanding of workplace dynamics. However, this positive effect can be significantly attenuated for individuals with high promotion focus. This attenuation manifests not only in the direct positive impact of performance pressure on work engagement but also in its indirect effect on organizational career growth. The underlying mechanism may involve excessive resource investment leading to intensive resource depletion, potentially causing resource exhaustion, which inevitably hinders the development of resource gain spirals. Therefore, practitioners should adopt a balanced perspective on the dual effects of performance pressure, recognizing its potential motivational benefits and possible adverse consequences. More importantly, organizations should integrate employees' personality traits into their management systems. This can be achieved by establishing scientific incentive mechanisms, optimizing resource allocation strategies, and fostering supportive organizational environments, thereby comprehensively facilitating employees' career growth.

List of abbreviations

AVE	Average variance extracted
CI	Confidence interval
COR	Conservation of resources
CR	Composite reliability
HTMT	Heterotrait-Monotrait ratio
LLCI	Lower level confidence interval
OCG	Organizational career growth
PF	Promotion focus
PLS-SEM	Partial least squares structural equation modeling
PP	Performance pressure
SPSS	Statistical package for the social sciences
SD	Standard deviation
ULCI	Upper level confidence interval
VAF	Variance accounted for
WE	Work engagement

Compliance with ethical standards

Ethical considerations

Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and confidentiality was maintained throughout the study. The research adhered to ethical guidelines and respected local cultural norms, ensuring no harm to participants or disruption to the community.

Conflict of interest

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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