

Personality as predictor of the perception of sales as a career

Ilona Pezenka

FHWien University of Applied Sciences of WKW
Institute for Communication, Marketing & Sales
Waehringer Guertel 97
1180 Vienna
Austria

Corresponding author:

[E: Ilona.Pezenka@fh-wien.ac.at](mailto:Ilona.Pezenka@fh-wien.ac.at)

T: +43 1 476 77 5858

F: +43 1 476 77 5704

Abstract

This research examines the influence of personality traits on the perception of the sales profession using data of 306 students of different academic management majors. The Five Factor Inventory was used to assess personality. Findings confirm that personality traits do have relevance in the prediction of sales attractiveness. Two personality traits, Extraversion and Conscientiousness, were significant predictors in the regression model. The results indicate that there is a predisposition to consider sales as career based in personality characteristics.

Keywords: Five Factor Model; personality traits; perception; sales career; regression

Introduction

Many studies confirm the negative attitude towards the sales profession in general. This disaffirmation has been documented frequently since the late 50s and early 60s (Staunton 1958, Mason 1965) until now (Dubinsky 1981, Swan and Adkins 1981, Swenson et al. 1993, Karakaya, Quigley, and Bingham 2011, Allen et al. 2014, Peltier et al. 2014, Cummins et al. 2015). Thus, sales literature demonstrates a continuing interest in assessing perceptions and attitudes toward sales as a potential career. Personality turned out to be a crucial factor regarding educational (Worthington and Higgs 2003, Rubinstein 2005, Lounsbury et al. 2009) and occupational choice (Peltier et al. 2014, Ehrhart and Makransky 2007, Stevens and Macintosh 2003, Mount et al. 2005). This study will complement this stream of research and take it further as it focuses on the question whether there is a predisposition to consider sales as a career, which can be traced back to certain personality characteristics.

Factors influencing the perception of sales

Various factors explaining the negative image of sales among students were proposed. A stream of research regards job characteristics as pivotal factor (e.g., Dubinsky 1981) whereas others claim the image of salespeople (e.g., Stevenson and Bodkin 1996) to be the main reason. Findings suggest that there are four key factors explaining student's perception of sales. These factors are attributes of the sales profession, the image of salespeople, sales knowledge, and sales ethics (Peltier et al. 2014). Besides these factors, which are directly related with the profession of sales, some authors (Costa, McCrae, and Holland 1984, Hogan 1996, Hogan and Blake 1996) already showed that there is a strong relation between the personality and the career choices or preferences for certain professions in general. Stevens

and Macintosh (2003) found strong evidence that personality plays a crucial role in whether students are considering to pursue a sales career or not. According to these authors four of the Big Five personality factors, namely Extraversion, Openness to experience, Agreeableness and Conscientiousness, are related to the attractiveness of one or more activities within sales jobs. Specifically, Extraversion as well as Conscientiousness were found to be positively related to the attractiveness of selling (Stevens and Macintosh 2003). The study of Stevens and Macintosh (2003), along with other results of past research, provide evidence that using personality traits as predictors may account for additional variance in the perception of sales as a career option. Thus, the study addresses two main research questions:

RQ1: Do Marketing & Sales students differ from students of other business majors in terms of the Big Five personality traits?

RQ2: How are the Big Five related to the perception of sales as a career?

Method

The present empirical study determined the personality profile of students by NEO-FFI (Costa and McCrae 1985) in a first step. The German translation of the NEO-Five Factor Inventory (Borkenau and Ostendorf 1994) was used to assess personality. The NEO-FFI captures five factors, namely Neuroticism, Extraversion, Openness to experience, Agreeableness, and Conscientiousness. The Five Factor Model is presumed to be very robust as it is based on a long development process and on numerous empirical studies. The NEO-FFI was considered to be suitable for this empirical investigation because a number of studies demonstrated the relations between vocational interests and the Five Factor Model (Barrick and Mount 1991, Stevens and Macintosh 2003). Moreover, the perception of a sales job and demographic data were collected. Perception of sales was assessed through 21 items. Most of these items were adapted from the study by Dubinsky (1981), which dealt with the attitude of different groups of people towards a sales job. Additional items based of own considerations were introduced. The items were assessed on a scale from 1 (not true) to 5 (true). Simultaneously the perceived importance of each item was determined.

An online survey among students of five different fields of management and business studies (Corporate Communication, Marketing & Sales, Human Resources Management, Hospitality & Tourism Management, Management & Entrepreneurship) was conducted. Altogether 306 questionnaires were completed.

Results

To confirm the theoretical NEO-FFI dimensions, the 60 items of the NEO-FFI representing the five dimensions (Neuroticism, Extraversion, Openness to experience, Agreeableness, and Conscientiousness) were subjected to a factor analysis with Varimax rotation. The number of factors was restricted to five. Results indicated that these five factors explain 37.9% of the variance. Explained variance, the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin criterion as a measure of sampling adequacy (.802) as well as the significant Barlett-test suggested a satisfactory model fit. All but one item (I prefer usually to do things alone) perfectly reproduced the five NEO-FFI dimensions.

First, descriptives of all 21 sales attractiveness items were calculated. Table 1 exhibits that the items *leisure time* and *safe job* were evaluated worst. At the same time, the largest discrepancy between perception and importance could be observed for these two items. In contrast, *customer contact* scored high. *Diversified task* as well as *challenging job* appeared to be the most important aspects of the sales profession.

Table 1: Items of the Sales Attractiveness Index

n=304	Perception mean	Importance mean		Perception mean	Importance mean
development opportunities	3.99	4.43	flexible work schedule	3.41	3.88
promotion prospects	3.84	4.05	diversified task	3.75	4.41
safe job	3.14	4.24	leisure time	2.29	3.44
challenging job	3.99	4.35	autonomy	3.90	4.22
space for creativity	3.27	4.00	self-affirmation	3.86	4.11
well-trained colleagues	3.47	3.92	international contacts	3.98	3.72
customer contact	4.55	3.82	professionalism	3.90	4.19
salary	4.06	4.27	dynamic work environment	4.01	3.85
social benefits	3.49	4.02	intellectual challenging	3.25	4.00
prestige	3.22	3.84	applicability of theoretical knowledge	3.63	4.04
travelling	3.91	3.17			

Group comparisons did not reveal any gender differences of the ratings of sales attractiveness items.

Regarding personality traits of students of different majors (Table 2), results revealed significant differences in the mean values of the dimensions Neuroticism, Openness and Conscientiousness. As the main focus of the study was on the perception of sales, Marketing & Sales students were compared to students with other majors. With regard to the dimension Neuroticism, Marketing & Sales students (16.73) achieved significantly lower scores than Corporate Communication students (20.44) as well as students of the major Hospitality & Tourism Management (21.07) did. Low values for the dimension Neuroticism indicate that the subjects act more rational, respond appropriate in stressful situations and are hard to embarrass. There were no significant differences between bachelor and master students, which can be attributed to the fact that the NEO-FFI has proven to be stable over time. Statistically significant differences were found with regard to gender, with female students (n = 203) scoring higher in the dimensions Neuroticism (f: 19.67, m: 14.02) and Agreeableness (f: 32.93, m: 31.63). Table 3 exhibits all significant differences of the pairwise comparisons of the business majors.

Table 2: Scores for Personality Dimensions

<i>Business Majors</i>	<i>Neuroticism</i>	<i>Extraversion</i>	<i>Openness</i>	<i>Conscientiousness</i>	<i>Agreeableness</i>
Corporate Communication (n=52)	20.44	33.83	32.96	35.21	33.73
Marketing & Sales (n=88)	16.73	33.36	30.53	36.86	32.95
Human Resources Management (n=38)	19.55	31.76	32.24	33.89	31.74
Hospitality & Tourism Management (n=29)	21.07	31.07	29.62	32.45	33.24
Management & Entrepreneurship (n=96)	15.61	32.99	30.28	35.72	31.60
Total Mean	16.95	32.89	31.19	35.83	31.67

Table 3: Significant differences between Business Majors

Corporate Communication Marketing & Sales	x				
	NEU	x			
	OP				
Human Resources M.	CON		x		
Hospitality & Tourism M.	OP	NEU	OP	x	
		CON			
Management & Entrepreneurship	NEU		NEU	NEU	x
	OP			CON	
	Corporate Communication	Marketing & Sales	Human Resources M.	Hospitality & Tourism M.	Management & Entrepreneurship

*NEU = Neuroticism; OP = Openness; CON = Conscientiousness

The perception of sales as a career was measured on the basis of the aforementioned 21 items. The mean of these 21 items formed the Sales Attractiveness Index describing whether a sales job is perceived rather positive or negative. In the first step, correlations between the Sales Attractiveness Index and the five personality factors were calculated. As can be seen from Table 4, there was a negative correlation between the degree of attractiveness of a sales job and Neuroticism. In contrast, Extraversion and Conscientiousness correlated positively with the attractiveness of sales. These results were consistent with the findings of Stevens and Macintosh (2003). They found a positive relationship between Extraversion and Conscientiousness and the attractiveness of the activity of selling. Also Barrick and Mount (1991), in their meta-analysis, demonstrated correlations between the dimensions of Extraversion, Neuroticism, Conscientiousness and Openness to experience with the job description of a sales manager.

Table 4: Correlations between the Sales Attractiveness Index and the Big Five personality traits

	Spearman Correlations
Neuroticism	-0.125*
Extraversion	0.189*
Openness to experience	-0.061
Conscientiousness	0.181*
Agreeableness	0.095

* $p < 0.05$

In a second step, a linear regression was performed in order to test the predictability of the attractiveness of sales by Big Five factors. The results of the regression are summarised in Table 5. As can be seen, the Big Five factors accounted for 6.1% of the variance in the Sales Attractiveness Index. This confirmed that personality traits would have relevance in the prediction of sales attractiveness. Further, Extraversion and Conscientiousness were significant predictors in the model.

Table 5: Regression

Predictors	β	t
Neuroticism	-0.105	-1.744
Extraversion	0.140*	2.294
Openness to experience	-0.047	-0.840
Conscientiousness	0.122*	2.130
Agreeableness	0.061	1.050
Adjusted R²	0.061	

* $p < 0.05$, Depend Variable: Sales Attractiveness Index

Discussion

Findings of the present study reflect that Marketing & Sales students do differ from students of other business majors in terms of the Big Five factor Neuroticism (Research Question 1). Furthermore, this study demonstrates that the Big Five personality traits are related to the perception of sales as a career. These results indicate that there is a certain predisposition to consider sales as a career based in personality characteristics. This model confirms the already aforementioned results of Stevens and Macintosh (2003) and Barrick and Mount (1991). As implication of this study, universities should focus on personality aspects within their educational programs to further encourage students in pursuing a sales career (see Peltier et al. 2015 for a detailed discussion). Second, personality should be accounted for in the recruiting of students as well as in the recruiting of sales employees.

As the limitations of this study are concerned, it must be noted of course that the correlations of the individual coefficients (Extraversion and Conscientiousness) of the linear regression are quiet moderate. It is thus likely that the prediction of the perception of sales will be improved with the inclusion of other factors like the image of salespeople, sales knowledge, and sales ethics as proposed by Peltier et al. 2014. However, due to the complexity of the Big Five personality traits, these values can be considered quite as good indicators for coherence (as can be seen for example in Chamorro-Premuzic and Furnham 2003). Another limitation of the present study can be attributed to the sample, which was limited to a student population of only one university.

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