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I'D RATHER NOT THINK FOR MYSELF: HOW POSITIVE FEEDBACK AND JOB AUTONOMY INFLUENCE THE IMPACT OF SALES ANXIETY ON BURNOUT

Authors: Dayle Childs, Nick Lee, John Cadogan, and Belinda Dewsnap

STRUCTURED ABSTRACT

1. Introduction

Practitioners are increasingly prioritizing the mental health of salespeople (Jayaprakash 2022). Practitioner articles outline multiple negative states linked to reduced salesperson mental health, with burnout (Peasley 2022) and anxiety (Nordli 2022) receiving a great deal of attention. Despite their well-known influence, both burnout and anxiety are hugely prevalent in salespeople. A recent practitioner survey estimated that 90% of sellers are currently feeling burnt out (Gartner 2022), whereas salesperson anxiety is three times higher than the national average (Cook 2022).

Anxiety can be considered a transient state that varies across situations (Sager and Wilson 1995). It is perhaps unsurprising that salespeople experience high levels of anxiety in their role, since failure is linked to increased anxiety, and 94% of sales activities result in failure (Raichshtain 2014). Compounding this problem, sales anxiety is said to drain the resources of salespeople, which may lead to other mental health burdens such as burnout, ultimately increasing salesperson turnover (Amin, Arndt, and Tanner 2023). Although recent sales research examines both anxiety and burnout independently, research is yet to understand the impact of sales anxiety on burnout. Typically, present research primarily focuses on anxiety's impact on performance-related outcomes (e.g., Agnihotri et al. 2016; Verbeke and Bagozzi 2000). However, sales research fails to examine the impact of anxiety on other mental health outcomes within salespeople. The present research looks to fill this void by understanding the impact of sales anxiety on salesperson burnout. In addition, understanding how any subsequent impact of sales anxiety can be influenced is of key importance to mitigating any negative impact. Job demands-resource theory (Demerouti et al. 2001) proposes that job resources buffer the negative impact of demands on burnout (Panagopoulos et al. 2018). However, resources may not necessarily operate beneficially for salespeople experiencing greater anxiety. For example, Strain and Taylor (1997) demonstrate that the benefits of job autonomy are dependent on a salesperson's need for autonomy. Highly anxious salespeople will have a reduced level of cognitive functioning (McKnight et al. 2016), and thus, such salespeople will likely need greater guidance and support from their sales manager (Kemp, Borders, and Ricks 2011). Sales manager feedback (Chakrabarty, Oubre, and Brown 2008) is an important external support mechanism to a salesperson. Positive feedback can offer recognition, reinforcement and encouragement (Lussier, Hatmann, and Bolander 2021). Thus, positive feedback from a sales manager is likely to effectively act in a buffering capacity mitigating the impact of sales anxiety on burnout. However, although autonomy may help to instil feelings of confidence and proficiency within a salesperson (Matthews, Beeler, Zablah, and Hair 2018), sales roles with a high degree of autonomy can have limited managerial support (Friend, Ranjan, Johnson 2019). Accordingly, autonomy given to highly anxious salespeople may actually exasperate the impact of anxiety on other subsequent mental health outcomes such as burnout. On the other hand, resources providing support to highly anxious salespeople, however, are likely to alleviate the negative impact of sales anxiety. Accordingly, the present study makes two key theoretical contributions. First, we seek to understand the impact of sales anxiety on an important mental health outcome in burnout. Second, the present study examines the moderating role of

both job autonomy and sales manager positive feedback, demonstrating the countervailing effects that such job ‘resources can have on the anxiety-burnout relationship. Accordingly, in role autonomy and sales manager positive feedback, the present research will examine the moderating role of two malleable managerial resources to further shed light on how sales managers can alter the impact of salesperson anxiety on burnout.

2. Literature review

Anxiety is an intrusive, pervasive emotion occurring within specific situations (Belschak, Verbeke, and Bagozzi 2006). Sales research typically examines anxiety from the state perspective, and focuses on understanding antecedents to, and performance-related consequences of, sales anxiety (e.g., Amin Arndt, and Tanner 2023; Boyd, Lewin, and Sager 2009; Lussier Philp, Hartmann, and Wieland 2021). Although much is known regarding the antecedents to anxiety, and its impact upon performance-based outcomes, the mental health of the salesforce has also become of paramount interest to practitioners. Burnout is the most popular mental health outcome discussed within sales, and is outlined as a state of resource depletion (Hobfoll and Freedy 2017). Burnout itself consists of three components: emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and a diminishing sense of personal accomplishment (Bakker and de Vries 2021). Emotional exhaustion is generally seen as the core of burnout and is characterized by a loss of resources, where depersonalization and a diminishing sense of personal accomplishment are characterized as a dysfunctional coping mechanism whereby an individual detaches themselves from others, and feelings of unhappiness and a lack of achievement (Maslach and Leiter 2016), respectively. A recent meta-analysis from wider literature identifies a consistent correlation between the constructs (Koutsimani et al. 2019). The high-pressure role of a salesperson results in anxiety being a common experience for salespeople, and such feelings of anxiety place extra cognitive demands on an individual, and influence their ability to work effectively and learn new skills or abilities (Hartmann and Lussier 2020). In this sense, sales anxiety can be seen as a job demand that subsequently drains a salesperson’s resources (Amin et al. 2023; Devotto and Wechsler 2019). In addition to this, salespeople who are experiencing anxiety are more likely to begin to detach themselves from sales activities, since they feel uneasy when undertaking such activities, and would prefer to withdraw from engaging in them (Belschak et al. 2006). They may also fear ridicule from peers and rejection from coworkers, further promoting them to withdraw from their role (Verbeke and Bagozzi 2000). Alongside withdrawing from sales activities, anxiety is also likely to result in a salesperson doubting whether they have the capabilities to successfully perform their role (Lussier et al. 2021). Anxiety is proposed to reduce an individual’s self-belief (Bandura 2015), and salespeople can experience a reduced ability to competently analyze sales situations (Agnihotri et al. 2016), leading to salespeople to feel a reduced sense of accomplishment when reflecting on their increased anxiety levels. Accordingly, the following hypotheses are presented:

H1a-H1c: Sales anxiety is positively related to subsequent: a) emotional exhaustion; b) depersonalization; and c) diminishing personal accomplishment

2.4 The buffering role of sales manager feedback When individuals are anxious, they may look for support to help to deal with these feelings (Beerh and McGrath 1992). In the sales role, the sales manager is the individual who they will most likely turn to for such support (Murphy and Li 2012). In sales, support can be provided in the form of feedback, and positive feedback helps to reassure salespeople that they have the capabilities to conduct their sales role, and that they have the support of their manager, helping to reduce resource loss in response to a stressor (Lewin and

Sager 2008). In addition, positive feedback may help to energize and build esteem within a salesperson, alongside providing informational aid that can improve an individual's circumstances, promoting a more solution-based coping strategy alternative to depersonalizing (Lewin and Sager 2008), influencing any subsequent impact of anxiety. Finally, the reassurance and reinforcing nature of positive feedback should provide confidence to salespeople, helping them to feel more positive about themselves and their actions within the sales role (Zellars et al. 2004). Accordingly:

H2a-H2c: Sales Manager positive feedback will negatively moderate the impact of sales anxiety on subsequent: a) emotional exhaustion; b) depersonalization; and c) diminishing personal accomplishment

2.5 The countervailing role of role autonomy Job autonomy is another job resources discussed to buffer the negative effect of job demands on burnout (Fernet et al. 2013), and is proposed to play a facilitating role, allowing flexibility in the way that salespeople can tackle role stressors (Hoppner et al. 2021). Thus, when reflecting on their actions, salespeople can feel a sense of pride and confidence in how they have dealt with a stressor, since they were in control of the way the stressor was handled. Thus, when individuals feel anxious, having job autonomy may help them to consequently generate some feeling of competence, helping them to perceive greater feelings of achievement within their role (Rapp, Agnihotri, Baker, and Andzulis 2015). However, in specific situations, it has been proposed that resources may act to inhibit negative outcomes (Matthews et al. 2018). This may be the case for highly anxious salespeople, job autonomy may also play an exasperating role enhancing the impact of anxiety on certain outcomes. Anxiety promotes individuals to partake in protective actions (Belschak et al. 2006), and given the freedom to do so, individuals may then decide to further withdraw from their sales role (De Clercq, Haq, and Azeem 2020). With a lack of autonomy and more support, individuals may be less likely to avoid conducting sales activities, despite their anxiety, preventing them from depersonalizing in their role. In addition, In high autonomy roles, when salespeople are anxious and ineffectively functioning cognitively, decisions may take extra cognitive and mental effort on behalf of the salesperson, as opposed to simply following stricter guidelines, resulting in greater resource drain over time (McCarthy, Trougakos, and Cheng 2016). Anxiety can impair a salesperson's ability, and can negatively influence their interpersonal mentalizing skills, leaving them less able to detect non-verbal cues, and bring focus and clarity to sales conversations (Agnihotri et al. 2016). Thus, anxious salespeople may prefer to have less control of how they do their jobs, as they require greater support to help them to deal with their increased cognitive effort (Kemp et al. 2011), which may result in greater subsequent exhaustion. Thus:

H3a-H3c: Job Autonomy will positively moderate the impact of sales anxiety on subsequent: a) emotional exhaustion, and b) depersonalization, but negatively moderate the impact of sales anxiety on subsequent diminishing personal accomplishment

2. Methodology

Participants were employed using a US-based online panel data company, and contacted across two time points one-month apart. Given salespeople's consistent customer interactions, customer interactions, and averagely high failure rates (Friend, Ranjan, and Johnson 2019; Hall, Ahearne, and Sujana 2015), one month was considered an appropriate time frame for anxiety to exert its impact upon burnout. To ensure data quality, considering recommendations from Johnson (2016),

the data was checked for ‘speeders’, and surveys examined for ‘straight-lining’; with any offending data eliminated from further analysis.

All constructs were measured by previously established multiple-item self-report scales, with specific items adapted to fit the context where necessary. The three burnout dimensions were separated temporally from all other variables, measured one-month later. In addition, scales were measured using different anchors and methods to help prevent common method bias. The marker variable approach was also used to determine any presence of common method bias (Lindell and Whitney 2001), and demonstrated no significant correlations with the other variables included within the study, and thus, common method bias is not a concern for the present study (Lindell and Whitney 2001). Multiple controls variables were also included, namely active coping, salesperson age, and duration in sales role.

3. Results All hypotheses were tested using structural equation modeling within LISREL 9.3, with the model demonstrates adequate fit, with the CFI and NNFI above .90, while the RMSEA and SRMR are below .08 (Newsom, 2015). Hypotheses tests were carried out using maximum likelihood estimation, finding general support for the hypotheses. Finding support for H1a-H1c, sales anxiety was positively related to subsequent emotional exhaustion ($p < .01$), depersonalization ($p < .01$), and diminished personal accomplishment ($p < .05$). H2a-H2c also finds support from the data, with positive feedback demonstrated to marginally mitigate the impact of sales anxiety on subsequent emotional exhaustion ($p < .10$), depersonalization ($p < .10$), and diminished personal accomplishment ($p < .10$). Turning to the moderating role of job autonomy, job autonomy positively moderated the relationship between sales anxiety and subsequent emotional exhaustion ($p < .05$), and sales anxiety and subsequent depersonalization ($p < .05$), but did not moderate the relationship between sales anxiety and subsequent diminished personal accomplishment ($p > .10$). A full overview of the results is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Full Overview of Results (Controls omitted for space)

Hypotheses	Unstandardized coefficient	Standard error	T-value	Hypotheses Supported
ANX -> EE (H1a)	.65	2.98	4.49	Yes
ANX -> DPERS (H1b)	.84	.13	5.91	Yes
ANX -> DPA (H1c)	.29	.07	2.07	Yes
ANX x PFB -> EE (H2a)	-.63	13.87	-1.95	Yes
ANX x PFB -> DPERS(H2b)	-.49	.53	-1.84	Yes
ANX x PFB --> DPA (H2c)	-.60	.32	-2.01	Yes
ANX x AUTO -> EE (H2a)	.69	9.90	2.15	Yes
ANX x AUTO -> DPERS (H3b)	.57	.38	2.15	Yes
ANX x AUTO -> DPA (H3c)	.41	.22	1.40	No

4. Discussion Anxiety and burnout are common experiences for salespeople that require careful management. The present study contributes to this literature by understanding the impact of

anxiety on the individual components of burnout, alongside understanding the countervailing roles of positive feedback and job autonomy. The findings demonstrate that salesperson anxiety subsequently influences each individual component of burnout. Such findings highlight that anxiety will not only detrimentally influence performance-based outcomes, but also other mental health outcomes, identifying a need for a greater focus to be placed on managing salesperson anxiety. The present study also demonstrates that job autonomy can actually exasperate the impact of sales anxiety on subsequent emotional exhaustion and depersonalization. Despite autonomy being generally considered beneficial within the salesforce, the present study challenges this premise. The findings are explained by the underlying logic as to how anxiety operates. Anxiety can lead to substantial suffering and cognitive impairment (Yasin and Dzlakifli 2009). When anxious, salespeople will need greater support, which is less likely in roles characterized by greater autonomy (Friend et al. 2019). Thus, in such conditions autonomy will result in a salesperson having to cognitively work harder, whilst feeling less supported, resulting in greater resource drain (McCarthy, Trougakos, and Cheng 2016). Alongside promoting greater resource loss, autonomy also allows the freedom for salespeople to further withdraw from their sales role. Autonomy is beneficial for salespeople clear in how to undertake their sales role, but may cause them to lose interest when things are unclear (Holle-Haudebert, Mulki, and Fournier 2011). Autonomy was not demonstrated to influence the relationship between sales anxiety and feelings of personal accomplishment. Although increased autonomy can result in increased subsequent burnout symptoms for salespeople, positive feedback can play a buffering role in mitigating the effect of sales anxiety on salesperson burnout. The results provide further support to the important role positive feedback can play in reducing the impact of differing stressors on burnout. The present study contributes to theory in two key ways. First, the present study is the first to examine the impact of sales anxiety on other mental health outcomes within salespeople, demonstrating that sales anxiety can subsequently enhance feelings of each of the three components of burnout. Second, the present study presents two ways that the impact of sales anxiety on subsequent burnout symptoms can be influenced, by considering the level of autonomy, and the amount of feedback, a sales manager should provide to anxious salespeople. Two key implications for practitioners are also present. First, the findings suggest that managers must keep a close eye on their subordinates' anxiety levels, since this can negatively impact their well-being, which will likely lead to greater turnover in their salespeople. Second, the present study assists sales managers in understanding how they can better manage anxious salespeople. Sales managers should look to reduce the autonomy given to salespeople when they are experiencing greater levels of anxiety, and increase the feedback they provide. This extra support to a salesperson may help anxious salespeople by providing greater clarity, alongside motivating them to engage with their sales duties. The present study provides some novel findings contributing to the field of sales management, however, has multiple limitations. First, although longitudinal in nature, the present study examines only between-person relationships, and should look to understand the within-person relationships to provide further evidence of causality (Childs et al. 2019). Second, the present study only examines the impact of sales anxiety on burnout, future research should seek to understand additional consequences of sales anxiety, alongside further understanding how sales anxiety can be reduced within salespeople. The present study acts as an introduction to understand how the impact anxiety can have on other mental health outcomes within salespeople, and sheds light on the potential dark side of role autonomy in specific circumstances. Further research should look to gain a greater understanding of how anxiety can impact the mental health of the salesforce.

THE INFLUENCE OF A PRECEDING COGNITIVE LOAD EVOKING SETTING ON THE PSYCHOPHYSIOLOGY OF SELLERS IN SALES TALK TRAINING. A PILOT STUDY

Authors: Alexander Eigner, Severin Maurer, and Johannes Reiterer

STRUCTURED ABSTRACT

Introduction

The complexity of B2B selling processes has been increasing constantly for decades. More than 15 years ago, D'Andrea (2005) and Schmäh (2008) recognized increasing price pressure, increasing competition levels and products with a more similar nature on the market. Additionally, scholars report more demanding and more powerful stakeholder groups in business (Hartmann and Lussier, 2020). The expanded digitalization of organizational procurement processes was also reported years ago (Sisakhti, 2015). The start of the COVID-19 crises has accelerated several trends in the market, especially when it comes the role of digitalization in selling processes. McKinsey (2020) reports heightened customer demand for digital interactions (e.g., remote communication, online and mobile transactions).

Sellers must understand the complex environment of customers and be able to react quickly to changes. In addition, they can help shape cognitive thinking and development processes in a holistic manner together with customers (Corsaro, 2022).

In the end it can be concluded that the pressure and demand of employees in B2B selling have increased steadily. Stress and burnout in sales representatives is becoming a more common consequence of such a demanding job profile and a more complex business environment (Lyngdoh et al, 2021).

This pilot study deals with the impact of activities which are associated with a high cognitive load and the level of stress and/or strain on sales reps in selling conversations. As Galy, Cariou, and Mélan describe, mental overload can be the result of a combination of task characteristics, such as time-pressure or task difficulty. However, their occurrence also seems to depend on other characteristics, including alertness (2012). Additionally, it evaluates whether the setting of an experiment related to the previous problem description could achieve reliable results.

This pilot study refers to the stress-strain concept derived from the field of ergonomics, whereby external stresses lead to emotional stress reactions, while task-inherent stresses are said to trigger mental strain reactions (Rohmert, 1986).

Therefore, our aim is to identify:

What are the effects on sellers' psychophysiological states of a mental strain condition that is aligned to the subsequent sales conversation, as compared to a distracting one that is not aligned to the subsequent sales conversation?

In a salesperson context, job stress has been defined as the psychological process in which salespeople perceive their personal cognitive and emotional resources as insufficient to meet unknown levels of demands (Ingmar et al., 2006; Sagar & Wilson, 1995).

The causes of stress, known as stressors, can be divided into four categories. First are the acute, time-limited stressors (e.g., triggered by the expectation of a critical customer meeting), second, stressor sequences, such as the impending loss of an important customer, third, chronic, intermittent stressors, such as regular control meetings with supervisors, and fourth, chronic stressors, e.g., typical requirement patterns of professional roles (Goodwin, Mayo & Hill, 1997).

As early as 1908, Yerkes & Dodson demonstrated the connection between activation and performance in their "law" of the inverted U-function. The course of performance is highly variable for each person. It depends on the level of emotional and motivational arousal. If the demand is too low, optimum performance is not achieved - a performance leak occurs. Increasing the level of arousal leads to an increase in performance up to a maximum value. If the level of arousal increases beyond what is required, performance falls again. (Broadhurst 1957; Yerkes & Dodson, 1908).

It is possible to measure stress as because the sympathetic nervous system reacts to activating stimuli and activates the adrenal medulla, which in turn causes the release of the neurotransmitter norepinephrine and subsequently the production of cortisol from the adrenal cortex (cortisol is a stress biomarker) and adrenaline. This in turn leads to an increase in blood pressure, heart rate, respiratory rate, and activation of sweat secretion (De Groot, Smeets & Semin, 2015).

If a low electrical voltage is applied to the skin, e.g., on the palms of the hands, via two electrodes, and the current flowing through this circuit is measured, it is found that it is not constant over time. It varies in the context of several processes, such as mental activity, deep breathing, or exposure to stressful stimuli. This means that the skin conductivity changes under the influence of these factors. (Gramann & Schandry, 2009).

An experiment can be used in order investigate the impact of a cognitive load prior to a sales meeting on the level of activation from students during selling conversations. Numerous studies showed that there is a strong link between activation levels and certain electrodermal activity parameters (Boucsein, 2012).

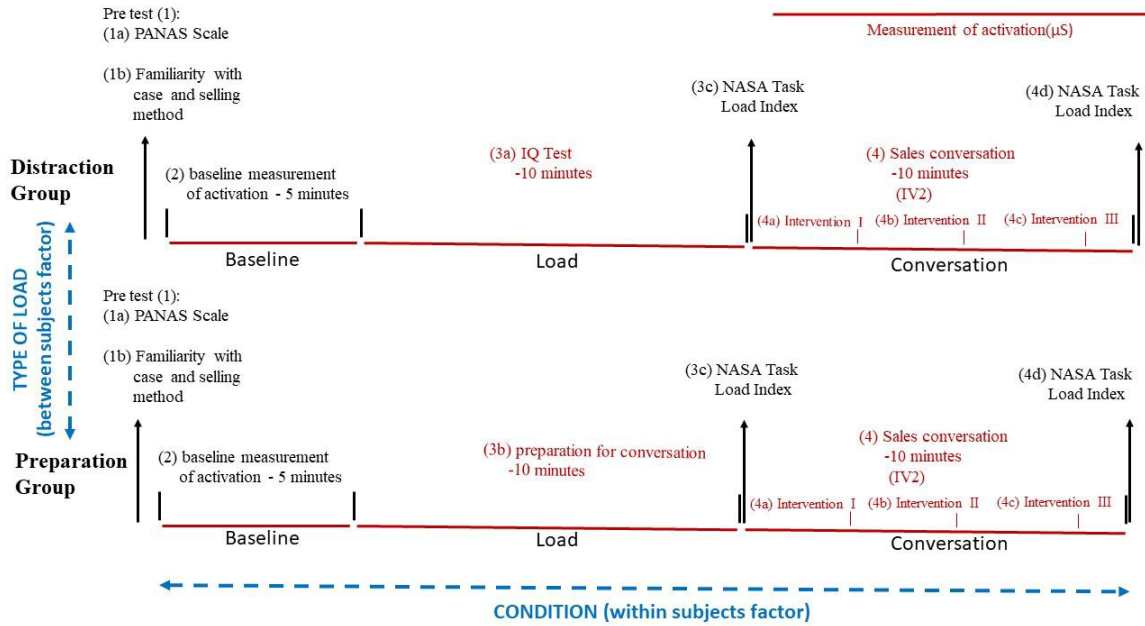
Procedure

Study setup and execution flow

Sales conversations are characterized by a flexible and dynamic nature, which in and of itself offers only a limited standardization of the setting (Koponen, 2019). To achieve a setting as standardized as possible, and thus obtain reliable results, the study was conducted in one of the science laboratories at the University. This environment fulfills the criteria of a laboratory study in accordance with Döring and Bortz (2016, 206). Personal-related confounding variables were reduced through a sampling process and a specific degree of standardization of the selling conversation. These factors enhance the internal validity of results (Döring and Bortz, 2016, 206). External validity is provided through the design of the case study. The case study includes central elements of a complex selling process with a focus on the identification of problems and their implications, in keeping with Rackham (1988).

Figure 1 gives an overview of the study setup of the pilot study enriched with information regarding the elements of the study design:

Figure 1: Overview of the experimental research process (own source)



As can be seen from figure 1, the first phase of the experiment (1) started three days prior to the laboratory experiment, with an investigation of the emotional conditions of participants and the familiarity with the case and the selling method. The 20 items Positive Affect Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS) scale, as reported by Watson (1988), was used to measure the mood of the participants (1a). Additionally, 20 questions related to the structure of the SPIN selling method and the case study were implemented in the questionnaire (1b).

The second phase (2) marks the beginning of the laboratory experiment and started with the arrival of the participants, the giving of instructions and obtaining informed consent. The necessary equipment to measure electrodermal activity was applied and a baseline measurement of five minutes conducted. After that, the third phase started.

The third phase (3) of the experiment included the operationalization of the “between subjects variable” LOAD. Participants in the distraction group were tasked to conduct a ten-minute IQ Test (3a) as per Hans Eysenck (IQ-Test International, 2022) to simulate a high cognitive load prior to the sales conversation. Participants from the preparation group received the order to prepare for the meeting for ten minutes (3b). All participants had to conduct the NASA Task Load Index (3c) (National Aeronautics and Space Administration, 2022). This scale measures the subjective mental workload of a specific task. It is highly reliable, and easy to administer (Hart, 2006).

The last phase (4) included role-playing. The aforementioned case study was developed and used to standardize the main elements of the selling conversation. Participants were given information about the offer, the role of the conversation partner in the buying organisation and market challenges. They acted as a sales rep from a complex logistics solution provider which targets international operating companies. The objective of the conversation was to investigate the situation of the potential customer, an international sport retailer. The function of the buyer in the role play was also highly standardised. The script included a description of current processes,

responsibilities and financial measures related to the supply chain. Additionally, the buyer confronted the seller with three interventions (one questions and two objections). The timing was limited with 10 minutes, including the three interventions (4a – 4c). At the end of the experiment, all participants had to conduct the NASA Task Load Index for a second time (4d).

Sample characteristics and manipulation check

Eleven students who had already attended personal selling classes with an average age of 26.27 (SD = 4.36) participated, of which five (2 male and 3 female) were randomly assigned to the preparation group and six (3 male and 3 female) to the distraction group. Results of independent T-Tests were indicative for successful implementation of the experimental manipulation as scores of experienced stress and mental strain were higher in the distraction group as compared to the preparation group.

Data preparation and analysis steps

Subjective data of test subjects was collected using the software Qualtrics (Qualtrics LLC). Electrodermal activity was measured using a Shimmer GSR+ device (Shimmer). Peak detection was based on the amplitude threshold value of 0.05 as suggested by Boucsein (2012). Averaged number of peaks and the peak amplitude in μS of nine participants were analyzed for three segments using the iMotions platform (Version 9.3; iMotions, 2022): a five-minute baseline condition (BL), the LOAD condition, and the first ten minutes of the sales conversation (CONVERSATION). Microsoft Excel 365 and IBM SPSS Statistics (Version 27) were used for statistical analyses. α was set at 5%.

Results

Subjective responses: perceived strain and affective states

Multifactorial mixed ANOVAs for both mental strain as well as affective states showed no significant results. However, with respect to mental strain, there was a drop in the distraction group, with the scores being higher before the sales talk than afterwards, whereas the scores in the preparation group stayed almost the same at both times. Regarding affective states, there was a raise in the negative affect mean score over time for the preparation group, whereas the reverse pattern was observed in the distraction group.

Physiological responses: number of peaks and peak amplitude

Multifactorial mixed ANOVAs for number of peaks and peak amplitude were conducted. Results showed that the number of peaks was the highest during the sales conversation, followed by the load condition and lowest during the baseline measurement. Additionally, whereas both groups had a similar number of peaks in the load condition, the number of peaks for the distraction group was higher in the talk condition as compared to the preparation group. Concerning peak amplitude, the average value for the distraction group was higher than the respective value for the preparation group. In the preparation group there was a slight drop in the mean amplitude between preparation and the sales talk, while in the distraction group the pattern was reversed.

Discussion and Conclusion

Inferential statistics on the comparison before and after the sales conversation in conjunction with the type of load showed no statistically significant results in most cases. The main reason is assumed to be the small sample size of the pilot study. To address this limitation, a replication

study with many more participants (~ 60) is planned. However, results regarding subjective and physiological responses suggest a tendency towards interaction effects between the two groups and within the different conditions. This pilot study marks the beginning of important investigations into certain psychological and physiological factors which may have a decisive influence on the experience and behavior in dynamic personal sales situations and could provide valuable insights useful for sales training in the future. The results also indicate an impact on the way B2B sales reps can reduce stress in the complex and demanding business environment in the long term. The avoidance of talks with a high cognitive load (e.g., complex calculations or analysis) prior to meetings with customers may positively impact their performance in conversations. Such a finding enhances the effectivity of the sales force and should be taken into consideration for the establishment of coaching and talent management practices.

ENABLERS AND INHIBITORS OF WELL-BEING IN SALES: INVESTIGATING THE IMPACT OF GOVERNANCE STRUCTURES

Authors: Monica Franco-Santos, Javier Marcos-Cuevas, Andrew Hough, and Pilar Rivera

STRUCTURED ABSTRACT

There is a recent surge of interest in the concept of well-being in the sales management research (Dugan et al., 2022) and in sales management practice. Well-being refers to how people feel about their everyday life (Ryan and Deci, 2001; Warr, 1978). For years, wellbeing has been considered a mechanism or a ‘mean’ (among many others) to deliver an ‘end’— typically customer value and sales growth. However, current health, environmental, societal, and geopolitical struggles have brought well-being to the forefront of our organizational lives. Well-being is considered a necessary condition for sustainable economic growth. US workforce data suggest that poor mental health alone costs the economy \$47.6 billion annually in terms of lost productivity due to unplanned absences (Gallup, 2023). Furthermore, data from the World Health Organization indicates that every \$1 invested in well-being initiatives (e.g., burnout, anxiety, stress, depression) results in a \$4 return due to enhanced health and productivity (Chisholm et al., 2016). Consequently, focusing on wellbeing is not only the right thing to do, but it is also vital for individuals and their firms.

In sales organizations, recent research has shown that sales practices such as pay-for performance can increase salespeople’s stress, compromising salesperson performance.

Given the widespread use of sales compensation and quotas in sales organizations, we aim to explore more widely how sales governance practices (namely performance measures, sales quotas, and compensation) contribute to, or otherwise undermine salesperson’s well-being.

This study builds on an established research stream that has addressed, amongst others, burnout (Lyngdoh et al., 2021), morale (Panagopoulos et al., 2018), anxiety and depression (Belschak et al., 2006) in sales.

The renewed interest in well-being in sales

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the importance of managing sales forces in unexpected circumstances (Hartmann, Lussier, 2020; Sheth, 2020). It has also brought to the fore the importance of well-being in sales. The pursuit of “sales well-being” has been proposed as a business philosophy (Dugan et al., 2022, p. 1), that is, a core belief that encourages the sales function to develop strategies that foster the well-being of salespeople and key stakeholders in the pursuit of sustainable sales growth. This well-being philosophy has evolved from paradigms that conceive organizational practices as mechanisms to “maximize profits for the benefit of stockholders, which automatically result in the efficient allocation of resources and optimum benefit to society” (Krishnan, 1973, p. 660). Modern sales organizations aim to achieve both profit maximization and high levels of well-being.

This dual pursuit has significant implications for organizations’ governance structures (i.e., the formal and informal practices developed to facilitate decision-making and the delivery of organizational goals) (Adler and Borys, 1996; Franco-Santos et al., 2017). We argue that traditional governance approaches must evolve to enable both salesperson performance and well-being. This is still a nascent phenomenon, so we need to integrate research findings from sales & marketing and organizational research to identify sales governance practices that have been shown to enable (or inhibit) well-being and extract insights relevant to sales organizations.

Traditional governance structure in sales

A governance structure refers to the framework of practices to guide decision-making and

facilitate the delivery of sales goals. These practices are embedded in a broader ‘governance context’ shaped by the needs of the organization’s stakeholders, culture, and external environment. The research reviewed suggests that traditional sales governance structures involve four main categories of practices. The first category, goals identification, includes practices for selecting, defining, and discussing the expected sales goals that need to be delivered (i.e., the ‘what’), the means for delivering these goals (i.e., the ‘how’), and the rationale underpinning both the selected goals and the actions to deliver them (i.e., the ‘why’). Examples of these practices include financial planning through budgeting or defining a balanced sales scorecard. The second category, goals-related knowledge, relates to the practices adopted to gather the data to understand the extent to which the expected outcomes are achieved. This practice often involves the use of metrics. For instance, in sales, it is common to adopt key performance indicators (KPIs) to measure goal attainment (e.g., profitability or customer satisfaction). The third category, goals review, comprises the practices adopted to review the extent to which the information gathered about sales goals shows they are being delivered as expected. For example, we find individual formal performance appraisals, ‘check-ins,’ and team performance review meetings in this category. Lastly, the fourth category, goals incentives, incorporates the various practices used to incentivize (and penalize) behaviours that are thought to explain the delivery of the expected goals. In this category, we find the use of extrinsic monetary incentives such as bonuses or commissions.

Research method: A scoping review

This paper examines the sales governance practices that enable (or inhibit) salespeople’s well-being. To do so, we conduct a scoping review of the relevant literature. Based on the insights extracted from the review, we develop an initial conceptual framework to support organizations’ transition toward “sales well-being focused” (Dugan et al., 2022, p. 2). Our scoping review of the sales and marketing literature follows Arksey and O’Malley’s (2005) staged approach, including a thematic analysis of the literature adopting Gioia et al. (2012) method. Stage 1 involved clarifying and explicitly stating our review question: What has previous research found regarding the sales governance practices that enable (or inhibit) salespeople’s well-being? Stage 2 consisted of performing the literature searches and selecting the research that met our inclusion criteria. We used ‘Web of Science’ as our core library database due to its filtering and snowballing (downstream and upstream) capabilities. We excluded non-peer-review papers and selected relevant articles published in the *Journal of Personal Selling and Sales Management* and journals assessed by the Association of Business Schools (ABS) as ‘highly regarded,’ ‘top,’ and ‘world elite’ in the areas of general management, organization studies, marketing, and sales. Through this process, we selected 128 papers. In Stage 3, we read the titles and abstracts of the documents identified and set those relevant to the review question (excluding those focused on external or top management governance), resulting in 42 sources selected for review.

Initial findings: enabling and inhibiting governance practices in sales well-being. The review shows that practices that favor the emergence of a supportive and safe context in which salespeople experience autonomy and control of their jobs, job meaningfulness, trust, collaboration, community, and a sense of personal growth enable well-being. When investigating the practices that inhibit well-being, we find that practices that foster a high pressure, competitive, and monitoring environment and those where people feel unsafe damage people’s well-being.

Our initial findings also reveal that the critical issue is outside the actual definition or design of the practice itself (e.g., the establishment of the sales quota). It is in how the practice is used and communicated —the connection between the practice and the person using it. The underpinning beliefs about salespeople's behaviors and how the practices should be used significantly influence well-being. For instance, a sales manager can use a salesperson's performance appraisal for monitoring or learning purposes. Our study points to possible interactions among practices (e.g., the purpose of the appraisal and manager-salesperson trust, and learning orientation).

Table 1. Enablers and Inhibitors

	Practice [well-being indicator]	Inhibitor, enabler or mixed	Reference example
Goals identification	Leader's goal-orientation and fit [stress]	Mixed	(Hohenberg and Homburg, 2019)
Goals knowledge	Intrinsic (meaningfulness) [life satisfaction]	Enabler	(Schwepker et al., 2020)
Goals review	Balanced scorecard	Mixed	
Goals incentives	Variable compensation [health]	Inhibitor	(Habel et al., 2021)
** Interaction of practices	Outcome control, activity control and capability control [engagement and stress]	Mixed	(Miao and Evans, 2013)

Conclusion and further research

All sales organizations have various forms of governance structures to support decision making and facilitate the delivery of organisational goals. Governance structures are purpose driven. They are meant to influence action with a purpose in mind. However, these very same governance structures can result in unintended consequences such as the erosion of wellbeing in sales. Given the currency and significance of well-being in today's sales organizations, with this study we aim to identify the practices that enable (or inhibit) salespeople's well-being and how these practices interact to produce well-being outcomes.

Next steps in the research will focus on completing the categorization of enablers and inhibitors, organizing these into a conceptual framework, with further hypothesis testing.

TRIGGERS AND SUPPORTING CONTEXT OF BUYER EMOTIONS IN B2B NEGOTIATIONS- EXPERT INTERVIEWS IN GERMANY AND SWITZERLAND

Authors: Alexander Grohmann, Sam Schweickhardt, and Christophe Fournier

ABSTRACT

Emotions affect all stages of the b2b purchasing process, decisions, actions and relationships. This study considers the emotional perspective of buyers in b2b negotiations and builds on Russell's Circumplex Model of Affect. Inductive categories are built to describe isolated emotional triggers and contexts based on interviews. Triggers can be found that were described independently by all interviewees and discussed with anchor examples and literature. Humorous small talk and conflict seem to be suitable for triggering all emotion qualities. The results can be used to take conscious action as a seller or to base quantitative experiments on.

SALESPEOPLE FLEXI-WORKSPACE SETUP

Authors: Aditya Gupta and Vishag Badrinarayanan

STRUCTURED ABSTRACT

Introduction: In recent years, organizations have been rapidly transitioning towards a hybrid workplace model by offering employees the flexibility to work from home, office, or some combination thereof. According to a recent survey of organizations conducted by CBRE Group, a global leader in commercial real estate development and services, 66% of mid-sized companies and 80% of large enterprises considered their future workplace policy as “hybrid guided flexibility,” where employees will divide their time between home and the office (CBRE 2021). The transition toward hybrid workplaces has accelerated post the COVID-19 pandemic, given that organizations found comparable, if not, superior employee productivity and performance levels and segments of employees reported better management of personal time and improved work-life balance, during the forced pivot to hybrid operations (Rangarajan et al. 2022).

The growing popularity of hybrid workplace models, diminished fears about loss of productivity among dispersed employees, and cost benefits of reducing their workspace footprint are forcing organizations to rethink their workspace management policies. Increasingly, organizations are consolidating their workspaces and have begun experimenting with hoteling models where employees do not have dedicated desks or cubicles assigned to them but can choose a workspace on a first-come, first-served basis or reserve space in advance depending on their onsite availability (IOFFICE 2022). These flexible workspace models are ideally suited for organizations in which employees have staggered working hours, part-time hours, or some form of hybrid arrangement wherein they operate only certain hours or days of the week from office premises. In fact, specialized businesses have emerged to help organizations manage flexible workspaces, with companies like SpaceIQ and Condenco offering software solutions for organizations to optimally align available space with employee functions and preferences.

Flexible workspace arrangements are especially attractive to sales organizations where salespeople are increasingly working remote or, even otherwise, often in the field, thus using dedicated workspace for only limited hours per day or a few days per week (Rangarajan et al. 2022). Although evidence is emerging on sales organizations reaping cost benefits of flexible workspaces and sustaining organizational performance (Alavi and Habel 2021), little is known about how such policies impact the activities and performance of salespeople (Flaherty and Schroeder 2022). According to a recent survey of marketing executives by the Chief Marketing Officer Council: (a) 57.5% report their teams work remotely at least some of the time and 48.7% work remotely all of the time, (b) team productivity is stable in both arrangements, with 50% reporting no change in worker productivity levels, (c) more than 33% are worried about weakening company culture with workspace flexibility, and (d) about 45% report that younger or newer employees are demonstrating less engagement and socialization within the company with workplace flexibility (CMO Council, 2022). Thus, it is evident that flexible workspace models can be a double-edged sword for sales organizations and systematic research is needed to delineate why, when, how, and with whom such models can be effectively deployed.

The research questions that we set out to address with this research are:

- Does adoption of a flexi-workspace setup impact salesperson performance?

- How do personal characteristics influence salespeople to adapt to flexi-workspace setup?
- What factors exert contingent effects on the success/failure of move to flexi-workspace?

Theoretical Framework

We investigate individual and organizational factors as well as boundary conditions that affect how salespeople navigate flexible workspace arrangements. To build our theoretical framework, we leverage perspectives from selling in dispersed, virtual, and technology-mediated environments (Badrinarayanan et al. 2011), work engagement theories (Rich et al. 2010), and social capital theory (Nahapiet and Ghoshal 1998) to examine how flexible workspaces influence salespeople's performance. In this regard, we explore the effect of flexible workspaces on job engagement (Rich et al. 2010), networking and intra-organizational sales resource coordination to support external selling efforts (Liu et al. 2020), customer-oriented behaviors (Lussier and Hartmann 2017) and, sales performance. While organizations enjoy the cost benefits of having reduced office space and associated lower expenses, little is known about how use of such flexi-workspace policies specifically impact the performance of salespeople.

Consistent with our first research objective, we examine how salesperson performance is affected by transition to flexi-workspace setup. Further, in line with our second objective, we explore the impact of workspace attachment on salesperson performance post move to flexi-workspace setup. The workplace serves as a canvas for expression of self-identity and salespeople often reflect workspace attachment through personalization or customization with family pictures, college/university affiliations, sports teams affiliations, awards and honors among other things (Pierce et al. 2001; Sable 2008; Zhang et al. 2021). Intuitively, it can be argued that salespeople who develop workspace attachment would be adversely affected by the move to a flexi-workspace setup. However, little is known about the magnitude and duration of such effects. Finally, we address our third objective by testing whether the move to flexi-workspace setup exerts differential effects on the performance of top salespeople versus others. Relative standing amongst salespeople has been shown to be an important determinant of the effectiveness of workplace policies such as recognitions, incentives, and bonuses (e.g., Harding and Murdock 2022; Viswanathan et al. 2018). We extend the argument to elicit differences in performances following a transition to a flexi-workspace setup.

Data and Methodology

We use a field experiment approach to explore the impact of transition to flexi-workspace setting where salespeople were moved from having fixed office cubicles to flexi-cubicles with cubicles shared among salespeople on alternate days. We conducted the field experiment using the participation of a financial services company based in India, in which salespeople are engaged in selling home loans/mortgages across the entire nation. This firm transitioned into a flexible workspace model and reduced their office footprint by 40%. While this company has multiple office locations nationwide, offices in some locations were transitioned to a flexi-workspace setup while others continued normal operations. This allowed us to test our theoretical framework in the locations that underwent change, while using salespeople in the other locations as the control group. We have data on 489 salespeople across three office locations who experienced move to flexi-workspace setup comprising our treatment group. Using company archival data, we were able to access sales performance data, along with various other individual salesperson level factors for each salesperson with data spanning over one-year before the transition and nine-months after the transition (with ongoing data collection). 31 salespeople left the organization

during our observation window post the transition, therefore we exclude them from our sample. Overall, we are left with 458 salespeople during our observation period.

We collapse monthly sales data into two periods, T1 and T2, and aggregate the sales data into quarterly and yearly timeframes. Aggregation allows us to overcome inconsistent standard error estimates and serial correlation problem that besieges multi-period difference-in-difference specifications and is an established practice (Shi et al. 2017).

Using confederates, workspaces of salespeople were visually analyzed and coded to assess levels of personalization. The confederates coded whether a salesperson had personalized the workspace, and to what extent it was personalized. We specifically codify, personalization as, (1) personal-family pictures, (2) affiliation with sport teams, (3) plants/flowers/decorations, (4) awards and certificates, (5) display of goals, personal targets, and (6) religious pictures and quotes. The information on cubicle personalization was matched to each salesperson data record from the company archival database.

While three office locations experienced transition to flexi-workspace, 12 office locations did not experience the treatment and therefore form the basis of our control group. Across these 12 offices, we have data on more than 3000 salespeople. To create a control group, we use a propensity score matching approach and matched each salesperson who experienced the transition with a control salesperson who did not experience transition in terms of various salesperson level characteristics such as past performance and experience. We use sales patterns spanning over four quarters of sales, in addition to salesperson variables such as tenure with the firm, salesperson recognition and awards as matching variables. Next, we matched each salesperson in the treatment group with a salesperson in the control group on the basis of proximity of their propensity scores.

Next, using a difference-in-difference specification combined with the two-period, we studied the impact of the treatment by analyzing salespeople's performance before and after the transition (T1 and T2 respectively) as well as secondary data on individual and organizational characteristics.

$$SalesPerformance_{it} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 Treatment_{it} + \beta_2 PostPeriod_{it} + \beta_3 Treatment_{it} * PostPeriod_{it} + \beta_4 X_{it} + \alpha_i + \epsilon_{it}$$

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where, SalesPerformance is quota attainment for salesperson 'i' during time period T1 pre-move or T2 post-move to flexi-workspace; Treatment_{it} is dummy that equals 1 if salesperson is in the treatment group and 0 otherwise; PostPeriod_{it} is the pre-post dummy, 1 for T2, and 0 for T1; X_{it} captures time variant and in-variant control variables; α_i captures salesperson specific random errors related with unobserved effects; X_{it} captures time-invariant and time-variant control variables including branch effect, past sales performance, salesperson tenure, salesperson characteristics and past sales trends; ϵ_{it} is random error term. β_0 captures the average quota attainment of control group in pretreatment period, β_1 captures the group mean difference in quota attainment between the treatment and control group, β_2 captures the mean difference in quota attainment in T2 relative to T1, and β_3 measures causal effect of move to flexi-workspace setup.

We ran multiple models, where time period T2 was computed differently. In the first model, we consider only the first quarter (three months period) post the transition, in second model T2

comprises of first and second quarter after transition, in third model, we aggregate all three quarters post transition to formulate T2. We report the results below.

These results indicate that after controlling for various factors, salespeople experience negative quota attainment post transition to flexi-workspace setup. Further, we can conclude that initially there is a negative impact on sales performance, but this effect goes away as time progresses and salespeople adapt to the new setup.

To explore the reasons for what can account for this sales performance dip, next, we consider the role of workplace personalization and salesperson being a top performer in the past time period.

$$\begin{aligned} SalesPerformance_{it} = & \beta_0 + \beta_1 Treatment_i + \beta_2 PostPeriod_t + \beta_3 Treatment_i * PostPeriod_t \\ & + \beta_4 Treatment_i * PostPeriod_t * \mathbf{WorkplaceAttachment}_i \\ & + \beta_5 Treatment_i * PostPeriod_t * \mathbf{TopPerformer}_i + \beta_6 X_{it} + \alpha_i + \epsilon_{it} \quad (2) \end{aligned}$$

where WorkplaceAttachment represents a dummy that is coded 1 if salesperson has personalized the workspace and 0 otherwise; TopPerformer represents a dummy that is coded 1 if a salesperson is ranked in the top 20% of the salespeople and 0 otherwise. We report the results of this analysis below.

Based on these results, we find that salespeople who had personalized their workspace experience higher decline and take longer to recover from the transition to flexi-workspace setup. On the other hand, top performers are not impacted by the move. These results have strong implications for sales managers who are experiencing such push to adopt flexi-workspace setups.

We find mixed results of how flexi-workspace allocation impacts salesperson performance; we find that workplace attachment moderates the impact of use of flexi-workspace on salesperson performance. We plan to explore the relationship between flexi-workspace and salesperson performance further, we plan to consider role factors such as inside sales vs. field sales and different personal factors such as level of personalization of cubicles as captured in our dataset at a finer level.

Theoretical and Managerial Contributions

As flexible workspace models are gaining in popularity in the business world, this study has the potential to make several novel contributions to theory and practice. To academicians, we offer the first theoretical test of transitions to flexible workspace in sales organizations and explicate its direct and contingent effects on salesperson and firm performance outcomes, thus creating avenues for future research to advance knowledge on hybrid workplace models in the marketing strategy and management literature streams. Managing salesperson engagement and performance is important to the success of firms; yet many fail to achieve desired results due to the lack of proper planning and poor change implementation. Therefore, to managers, we aim to offer actionable implications on how to design, deploy, and benefit from flexible workspace models, while highlighting individual and organizational factors that augment or dampen their impact. Our study offers novel contributions to workplace design, salesforce management, and marketing strategy research.

A TYPOLOGY OF LONE WOLF TENDENCIES: INTERACTION EFFECTS OF ORGANIZATIONAL COMMITMENT ON UNETHICAL SELLING AND CUSTOMER ORIENTATION

Authors: Tyler Hancock, Catherine M. Johnson, Michael Mallin, and Ellen B. Pullins

ABSTRACT

This study uses agency theory, ethical egoism, and social contractualism to explain how salespersons' lone wolf tendencies can increase unethical selling behaviors and reduce customer orientation when meeting sales objectives. We hypothesize lone wolf tendencies lead to moral hazard by increasing sales associated with unethical selling behaviors and decreasing sales associated with customer-oriented behaviors. In addition, we show organizational commitment enhances this effect. Thus, we find that the organization can be partially to blame for causing challenges in managing the agent-principal agreement. Finally, we conducted a cluster analysis to determine the types of salespeople more likely to behave unethically and more likely to behave ethically.

THE ROLE OF ENTREPRENEURIAL ORIENTATION IN THE PROCESS OF SALES DIGITALIZATION AMONG INTERNATIONALIZING GROWTH-ORIENTED SMES

Authors: Minna Heikinheimo, Saara Julkunen, Koponen Jonna, and Jokiniemi Sini

ABSTRACT

Leveraging sales digitalization (SD) enables business-to-business firms to enhance their value creation and competitive advantage. The earlier SD investigations have focused on digital maturity models, technology-oriented development, and un-learning processes. Yet, there is scant research examining SD from a holistic and processual perspective and providing in-depth understanding and actionable managerial guidance. In this research we utilize entrepreneurial orientation (EO) to explain the evolving sales digitalization phases and the actions and behavior incorporated into each phase. Based on empirical evidence from small and medium-sized enterprises, this study offers a preliminary model for SD and enhances the current knowledge of EO dimensions.

EXPLORING THE ACCEPTANCE OF AN AI-AND VR-BASED NEGOTIATION TRAINING AS A NOVEL APPROACH IN SALES EDUCATION

Authors: Robin Hindelang, Luca Fuchs, Pia Reihle, Verena Alt, Stephanie Jordan, Barbara Dannenmann, Alexander H. Kracklauer, Jörg Westphal, and Deva Rangarajan

ABSTRACT

This study aims to investigate the acceptance of negotiation training with artificial intelligence (AI) and virtual reality (VR) among students with negotiation experience at universities and universities of applied sciences in Germany. The study focuses on the sales negotiation training Beat the Bot, newly developed at the University of Applied Sciences Neu-Ulm. The research model and hypotheses were developed based on the UTAUT2 model and include five of the seven original constructs plus an additional construct, trust. An online quantitative survey was conducted to assess the acceptability of these constructs. Regression analysis was used to test the hypotheses based on the modified UTAUT2 model. The results show a high acceptance of negotiation training among German students with negotiation experience. These results provide important insights into increasing the acceptance of AI-driven agents beyond negotiation training.

THE INFLUENCE OF THE "OTHERISH" BEHAVIORS ON THE PRACTICE OF EFFECTUAL SELLING

Authors: Shinji Hongo and Chizuru Taniguchi

Abstract

The role of indirect sales activities by non-salespeople is becoming increasingly important as online business meetings and information dissemination via social networking sites become more common. This is similar to the role of part-time marketers (Grönroos, 1989) in service logic. With the research question "How can we practice sales without selling?", this study examined a case study of learning and practice of effectuation from the theoretical framework of effectual selling (Hughes et al., 2020). The results confirm that part-time salespeople performing the "otherish" (Grant, 2013) behaviors of successful other-oriented givers leads to long-term sales outcomes. This provides suggestions for practitioners to take action.

INVESTIGATING FRENCH SALESPEOPLE'S EMOTION MANAGEMENT DURING NON-VIRTUAL SALES INTERACTIONS THROUGH THE LENS OF THE GIOIA METHODOLOGY

Authors: Michel Klein, F. Juliet Poujol, and Bruno Lussier

ABSTRACT

The coronavirus crisis led to more remote selling, but in some markets both salespeople and customer are seeking for non-virtual interactions. Through the prism of the Gioia methodology, this paper presents a qualitative study whose objective was to understand and explain the impact of salespeople's emotion management on sales success during non-virtual sales interactions. The authors collected accounts of salespeople's and customers' emotional behaviors during successful or failed sales interactions. Open-ended questionnaires were used for identifying emotional behaviors involving a decision to buy or not to buy, during non-virtual (i.e., face-to-face or on the phone) salesperson-customer interactions.

IMPROVING MARKETING PRODUCTIVITY BY INCLUDING THE SALES PERSPECTIVE IN THEIR STRATEGIC THINKING

Author: Ken Le Meunier-FitzHugh

STRUCTURED ABSTRACT

Just before writing this, I was listening to/watched a performance of Maria de Buenos Aires by Astor Piazzolla played by the Brass of the Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra (if you are interested you can find it on YouTube). As I was listening to the music, I realised that individually these are great players, but as an ensemble they created a wonderful performance by working together, knowing when to support each other and when to take the lead. Watching the ensemble working together made me think again about sales and marketing collaboration and how to improve interactions between sales and marketing functions. My research began after observing first-hand dysfunctional practice between sales and marketing functions in industry (Le Meunier-FitzHugh and Piercy, 2007). There were many instances where they did not work in concert and therefore did not create their best performance. After many years of researching the topic, I have found that the issues that were initially identified could be overcome through collaborative working, joint planning activities and cross-functional projects. This paper will review the topic in the light of findings from continuing research, the changing environment that has been created by Corvid, and the impact of technology on sales and marketing practice to provide discussion points and guidance on managing recent changes.

The impact of collaboration

According to evadible research marketing function still have primary responsibility for managing brand value, creating an online 'buzz' about the organisation's activities, and managing general communications with the market. However, these communications can become unidimensional as marketing does not always consider market information from the customers perspective. The issue may be one of culture. Marketing has traditionally played the key role of attracting new customers' attention, creating new campaigns, developing interactive web content, and building customer value through the offer, which can lead to a feeling of 'expertise' and a belief they understand the situation and do not always need any input from other sources. Consequently, there is a danger that sales are excluded from contributing their knowledge of the customer's needs to planning activities, and from engaging in early interactions with potential customers. Salespeople spend all their time interacting with customers and so they have unique insights into the market and can identify emerging challenges and new trends. They also have a valuable contribution to add to the customers' journey and to the design of content of webinars and case studies, as well as providing feedback to marketing about the effectiveness of marketing messages (Malshe and Krush, 2020). Therefore, it should not just marketing who are involved in designing new product launches, attracting new customers, and engaging customers through social media links and other offline channels. However, engaging with sales over these activities is not easy as they have their own roles, culture and motivation that are focused on capturing sales. Additionally, there are barriers to sales and marketing collaborating, including the allocation of resources and motivation, as salespeople are not encouraged or rewarded for helping to building customer value propositions, building marketing plans, or creating posts. This may be something that needs to change.

The Customer Journey

Organisations would benefit from establishing processes for including sales in customer interactions, gaining information from them, and handing over enquiries at the appropriate moment and allowing sales to feed into the interaction with the customer and then following up on relevant sales enquiries as this can result in high conversion rates and customer retention (e.g., Malshe and Biemans, 2014). With input from the sales team, marketing can create a strategy to move the customer seamlessly through the entire buying cycle, which means that the customers' journey is not interrupted by a 'handover' from marketing to sales as potential customers move from general enquiries into buying activities. Various media may be used by marketing to 'warm-up' leads and guide potential customers to engage with the organisation's offer by creating interest in their brand values, becoming a fan/supporter of the offer, and providing feedback. These activities can they be fed into the sales pipeline, with insights into customers' interests/requirements highlighted that will make it easier for salespeople to contact and engage the customer in the right way. These early stages of contact with potential customers may also be enhanced by including sales in early communications through social media tools that are linked are aligned to the interests of the target segment. This early interaction can lead to a burgeoning customer relationship built around points of common interest and touchpoints to other promotional activities. More and more organisations recognise the symbiotic relationship of sales and marketing over the management of the sales pipeline (Malshe and Krush, 2020).

Building online customer relationships

Building online customer relationships is an area where sales have expertise that can be helpful to marketing in generating the right sort of interactions. The key is to find areas of common interest and concern that can start the conversation and then to provide links to further information, informed figures within the industry and appropriate web spaces. Once the potential customers are engaged, sales technology may be used to match customers with various sales processes that improves the organisation's visibility and generates conversations with designated sales and marketing people on relevant topics. Participating in discussions on sites like LinkedIn can help sales and marketing people to keep abreast of new ideas and themes and associate the selling organisation with specific topics. A new role that marketing may play is to help salespeople to become an Internet 'friend' and make it possible for them to create a trustworthy persona that the customer will be willing to contact when they have a problem they need to solve. Recent data from LinkedIn indicates that online communications between buyers and sellers in B2B contexts can increase sales performance by as much as a third (Cortez, Johnston and Dastidar, 2023). Sales and marketing people who engage in online conversations that are relevant to the buyer can establish the framework for their purchasing activity where customers can be encouraged to move into buying activities through email blasts, landing page optimisations and live sales calls. However, these activities are time consuming, and management will need to set up an appropriate structure to support sales and marketing people engaging.

Managing online vs offline sales interactions

Customers use search engines, attend virtual tradeshows, engage in specialist blogs, and visit organization's websites to ask questions or participate in discussions, often before they speak to a salesperson (or the organisation). As a result, many buying decisions are made early in the process based on online marketing activities that removes salespeople from the process. Although social media and online selling have many advantages for selling organizations, the loss of

personal interaction may create issues in trust and loyalty that could have long term consequences to sales and for future value creation. Resistance to new technologies is common and an additional problem for sales and marketing people is that they may feel that their personal time is being eroded by the constant need to engage with customers. Sales and marketing people may find that they are required to constantly be 'at work', as social media is active 24 hours a day, seven days a week and enquires need to be answered promptly, but some of this burden can be alleviated by using AI chatbots. The aptitude and appetite for an online life may be more attractive to younger employees (e.g., Millennials, Gen Z) who have been brought up with social media and online visibility. There is of course a further issue, in that many buyers may be unwilling to engage in social media interactions with salespeople, as they are thought to be too intimate/personal or not related to work activities (Le Meunier-FitzHugh and Douglas, 2016). However, it should be possible to continue to engage with these customers through traditional communication channels to maintain their relationships. There is a huge variation in the use of social media in selling interactions and many salespeople are still struggling to integrate social media into their activities.

Benefits of better customer information – Big data

Customer data and information on industry trends and competitor information is required in all marketing and selling situations. The advent of mobile communications and online transactions has increased the speed of sales interactions, driving the need for current, real-time customer/market information. A benefit of using social media in marketing activities is that it generates a wealth of customer information that can be analysed with the assistance of AI and media sites such as Google Analytics and Facebook Insights. These sites can also provide data for measuring responses to the organisation's online activities. Customers can communicate and interact through a wide range of channels and media, and advanced analytics can facilitate information creation at a frighteningly fast rate. Salespeople who are continuously connected to the market and their customers via the Internet, have become a primary source of this critical information. When this metadata from big data streams is merged with information from salespeople it can be used to engage more closely with customers, identify trends and buying habits, and to create customer value (Shahbaz, Gao, Zhai, Shahzad, Luqman and Zahid, 2021). Further, live feedback from customers allows the organization to integrate all this information with their intellectual capital to innovate and customise their offer to the customer. There is therefore an argument for including salespeople on marketing planning committees while they are developing marketing campaigns and engaging with new product launches.

Recommendations and conclusions

The rapidly changing commercial landscape are driving the need for marketers to create more relevant, adaptive marketing techniques to attract new customers and take them on their customer journey, but more and more these activities need to involve salespeople's expertise. The development of media both online and offline as a route into the selling environment offers many new opportunities, especially for those who are IT savvy. To mitigate some of these issues, managers should be leading by example by demonstrating their total commitment to adopting new, integrated working practices and providing online training for their team to help with the additional pressures that social media can create. Training may help sales and marketing teams to use social media jointly and to integrate new communication channels into their working practices. Exploring how to engage with customers within a secure, closed training environment would allow sales and marketing people to experiment with creating joint social media

interactions and to avoid some of the many pitfalls of conversing online where it is hard to correct comments. Sales and marketing people could also be offered social media mentors, which may also help with building stronger, cohesive teams by integrating traditional skills with the new opportunities offered by social media.

Sales organisations need to get closer to their customers and consumers, so that they can increase customer value and generate market growth. However, social media offers a more integrated marketplace that does not observe traditional territorial boundaries. Drawing salespeople into the marketing effort is necessary to keep the customers' offer fresh and relevant. Salespeople need marketers to keep them informed about new developments and trends identified through market research and to help make sense of big data analytics. As social selling becomes more commonplace, both sales and marketing people are required to build online relationships as well as physical ones in an integrated fashion and processes need to be set up to enable them to achieve this without impeding their traditional functions. Further, New features and educational materials are frequently discussed openly through social media sites so that customers are often aware of offers and benefits before they engage with the organisation. This means that sales and marketing teams need to be 'talking from the same hymn sheet' to establish relationships throughout the customer journey from the very first touch points. We are becoming more dependent on virtual selling environments and understanding virtual sales interactions will become one of the greatest challenges for selling organisations of this decade.

IS IT ORGANIZATIONAL IDENTIFICATION OR JUST COMPLIANCE? THE EFFECTS OF FORMAL AND INFORMAL SALES CONTROLS ON THE ATTITUDES, BEHAVIORS, AND PERFORMANCE OF B2B SALESPEOPLE

Authors: Stacey L. Malek, Shikhar Sarin, and Bernard J. Jaworski

STRUCTURED ABSTRACT

Sales management controls systems (SMCSs) include all the ways that organizations attempt to influence salespeople toward organizational objectives (Malek et al. 2018). SMCSs comprise formal (*written, management-initiated*) and informal (*unwritten, worker-initiated*) forms of control that include behavioral/outcome goal setting, monitoring, feedback, and reinforcements (i.e., rewards and punishments) (Challagalla & Shervani 1996; Jaworski 1988; Malek et al. 2022). SMCSs have been widely studied by sales/marketing scholars over the last 35 years because the topic has strong managerial relevance. Importantly, the topic remains timely due to corporate scandals, such as the 2016 Wells Fargo incident, where salespeople were subjected to strong formal control over their activities that ultimately resulted in desperation and criminal behavior (opening fraudulent accounts; Corkery & Cowley 2016).

Despite many advancements in our understanding of the effects of sales controls on the attitudes, behaviors, and performance of salespeople, there are three lingering issues that preclude our complete understanding of their real impact. First, the vast majority of research has been on formal (versus informal) controls, which has led to an imbalance in theoretical and empirical development of the topic (Malek et al. 2018). Few studies investigate all types of formal and informal controls together. This is problematic because we know that formal and informal controls are pervasive in every sales organization and should be examined together. Second, research suggests that the effects of all these sales controls are somewhat equivocal, meaning they all have the potential to impact salesperson performance (Samaraweera & Gelb 2015). The issue here is that we have little understanding of the processes that lead to higher salesperson performance and specifically whether such processes (and other relevant outcomes) are good or bad for organizations. Third, and from a practical perspective, many sales organizations focus on activity controls (i.e., maximum formal control over salespeople by managers) because they are effective at steering salespeople to performance results in the short term. However, evidence from the field suggests that a short-term perspective on salesperson performance may be deleterious to sales organizations in the long run (as illustrated by the Wells Fargo example).

To address these challenges, this research explores three broad questions:

1. What are the relationships among formal and informal sales controls?
2. How do formal and informal sales controls influence a salesperson's identification (commitment) versus compliance (submission) to an organization, and through these processes,
3. How do formal and informal sales controls influence salesperson attitudes, behaviors, and performance?

We develop a theoretical framework based on organizational identification and empirically test our hypotheses in a two-wave study among 750 business-to-business (B2B) salespeople across a variety of industries and organizations. We find that most types of sales controls support self-

control and/or identification, while activity control simply leads to compliance. While both identification and compliance positively influence sales performance, identification (compliance) has a positive (negative) relationship with more long-term indicators of salesperson performance, like job satisfaction and loyalty. Our findings have implications for our understanding of how formal and informal controls fit together, their influence on organizational commitment, and their downstream effects on attitudes, behavior, and performance. For sales managers, this could be a wake-up call on the potential downside of a short-term (versus long-term) approach to salesperson performance management.

In what follows, we give a brief overview of the SMCS literature followed by a short presentation of our theoretical framework and hypotheses. Then, we outline our methodological approach to the research questions along with key findings of our research. Finally, we close with a discussion, highlighting some actionable recommendations for sales managers.

SMCS Literature

A rich and extensive body of research on SMCSs, dating back to the late 1980's, examines the effects of sales controls on the attitudes, behaviors, and performance of salespeople. Despite several insights, there are also some challenges, which limit our understanding of the topic. First, the vast majority of research has been on formal controls, and mainly on activity (93%) and output (75%) controls (Malek et al. 2018). A meta-analysis of related studies suggests that both types of control have a positive relationship with salesperson outcome performance (Samaraweera & Gelb 2015). Limited studies, however, have looked at the effects of informal—self (14%), social (20%), and cultural (7%) controls on salespeople, despite our understanding that sales controls exist and operate simultaneously (Malek et al. 2018). Further, there is evidence suggesting that environments with high levels of both formal and informal control have the strongest relationship with salesperson job satisfaction and overall performance (Cravens et al. 2004; Jaworski et al. 1993). Regardless, very few studies look at how all types of controls might fit together in one framework, which seems crucial to determining their real influence. Finally, there is little understanding of how (i.e., through what processes) all sales controls actually influence salesperson performance. This is important because it is challenging for researchers to capture sales performance in the long run, and we know that sales controls can lead to information asymmetry, negative role perceptions, and dysfunctional behaviors (Jaworski & MacInnis 1989).

Theoretical Framework and Hypotheses

Something that is rarely explored in SMCS literature is the fact that sales controls all contain varying levels of autonomy for salespeople. For example, activity control is highly controlling, whereas self-control is highly autonomous. In this research we propose that sales controls may be viewed through a self-determination theory lens, which can be linked to organizational identification theory. Based on prior conceptualizations of various control types, we distinguish between autonomous, autonomy supportive, and controlling forms of sales controls in Table 1. Sales controls which are autonomous or autonomy supportive (whether directly or indirectly) lead to identification with and/or internalization of organizational goals, values, and regulations (Gagne & Deci 2005). This can be directly linked to the organizational identification process, whereby an individual begins to recognize the value in what is being asked of them (Ashforth et al. 2008). Consequently, we hypothesize that some sales controls support salesperson autonomy, while others do not. This has direct implications for a salesperson's development of self-control

and on their level of commitment (i.e., identification versus compliance; Kelman 1958) to an organization. Although both identification with and compliance with an organization are expected to have a positive relationship with performance in the short term, they are expected to have opposing relationships with possible indicators of salesperson performance in the long run (i.e., job satisfaction, loyalty, altruism, dysfunctional behaviors).

Table 1: Controls types by degree of salesperson autonomy

<i>Control Type</i>	<i>Conceptualization</i>	<i>Autonomous, autonomy supportive, or controlling</i>
Self-information ¹ (informal)	“The degree to which an individual engages in self-setting, self-monitoring, and self-assessing personal work-related objectives” (Malek et al. 2022, p. 418)	Autonomous (salesperson directed)
Social information (informal)	“The degree to which an individual’s work group develops values, norms, and beliefs, monitors adherence, and provides feedback” (Malek et al. 2022, p. 420)	Autonomy supportive (salesperson is a part of the work group)
Cultural information (informal)	“The degree to which members of an organization develop broadly shared values, norms, and beliefs; monitor adherence; and provide feedback” (Malek et al. 2022, p. 420)	Autonomy supportive (salesperson is a member of the organization)
Output information (formal)	“Setting output goals, monitoring salespeople, and providing feedback on performance” “Control theory and goal theory suggest that output information has a strong motivational impact on people, directs their attention to the task, and makes output goals salient” (Challagalla & Shervani 1996, p. 91)	Autonomy supportive (salesperson decides how to meet the output goals)
Capability information (formal)	“Setting goals for the level of skills and abilities, monitoring salespeople, providing guidance for improvement” “Providing guidance to improve skills and abilities requires supervisors to commit time and effort to assess the capabilities of salespeople” (Challagalla & Shervani 1996, p. 91)	Autonomy supportive (focus is on investing time/effort in guiding salesperson development)
Activity information (formal)	“Specifying routine activity goals (e.g., call rate), monitoring salespeople, and providing feedback on activity performance” “Activity goals tend to be proximal in nature, requiring supervisors to monitor salespeople more frequently” (Challagalla & Shervani 1996, p. 91)	Controlling (salespeople are told how to perform the work and are monitored frequently)

*Formal and informal controls have three dimensions (information, rewards, and punishments) and corresponding measurement scales. In this research, we only look at and measure the informational aspects of sales controls (i.e., goal setting, monitoring, and feedback) and not the reinforcing aspects (i.e., rewards and punishments) based on our research questions, although we acknowledge that extending the framework to include measures of rewards and punishments could be informative.

The main hypotheses tested in this research are:

- Social information (H1) and output information (H2) have a positive relationship with self-information (because they provide direct autonomy support), which then has a positive relationship with organizational identification (H3);
- Cultural information (H4) and capability information (H5) have a positive relationship with organizational identification (because they provide indirect autonomy support);
- Activity information has a positive relationship with organizational compliance (H6);
- Organizational identification (H7) and compliance (H8) have a positive relationship with salesperson performance in the short-term;

- Organizational identification (H9) has a positive relationship with (a) job satisfaction, (b) loyalty, and (c) altruism, and a negative relationship with (d) dysfunctional behaviors (potential long-term indicators of salesperson performance);
- Organizational compliance (H10) has a negative relationship with (a) job satisfaction, (b) loyalty, and (c) altruism, and a positive relationship with (d) dysfunctional behaviors (potential long-term indicators of salesperson performance).

Methods and Results

To test our theoretical framework and hypotheses, we draw on survey data collected among 750 B2B salespeople in the U.S., across two time periods (257 responses were retained in round 2). Panel data were collected through a market research company that took measures to verify salesperson identity, minimize self-selection bias, and maximize the response rate. Respondents are representative in terms of their demographic characteristic like gender, age, sales role, and sales tenure, among others, and are from a wide variety of industries and organizations. All measures used in the questionnaires are validated in the literature. To minimize the potential impact of common method bias, we collected data on informal controls and control variables in time 1 and formal controls and outcome variables in time 2.

Data were analyzed using structural equation modeling (SEM) in Mplus 8. Before testing our hypotheses, we checked the reliability of each scale (e.g., all $\alpha > .70$) and validated the measurement model with a confirmatory factor analysis ($\chi^2 = 3135.17$ (1688), $p < .001$; SRMR = .09; CFI = .89; TLI = .88; RMSEA = .10). We then conducted a latent variable path analysis. Beyond testing our specific hypotheses, we modeled the data to check the effects of all formal and informal controls on self-information, each mediator (identification, compliance), and each dependent variable (performance, job satisfaction, loyalty, altruism, dysfunctional behaviors). We also control for the influence of organization size, organizational tenure, and sales tenure on each mediator and dependent variable.

Results may be found in Table 2 (standardized estimates for the hypotheses are in bold). We find support for 15 out of 16 of our hypotheses. Other results also provide support for our framework. For example, Table 2 shows that activity information reduces self-information and identification, and output information reduces compliance.

Table 2: SEM results (***p*<.01, ***p*<.05, **p*<.10)

<i>IV</i> / <i>DV</i>	Self Info R ² = .32	Identif-ication R ² = .45	Comp-liance R ² = .30	Perform-ance R ² = .39	Job Satisfaction R ² = .73	Loyalty R ² = .84	Altruism R ² = .40	Dysfunction Behavior R ² = .73
Self-information		.17*** H3	.05	.10	-.05	-.00	.12	-.11
Social information	.32*** H1	.12	-.17*	.07	.16**	.07	.16	.07
Cultural information	-.03	.28*** H4	.07	.06	-.05	-.03	-.07	-.07
Output information	.49*** H2	.12	-.50***	-.10	-.28***	-.18*	.14	.10
Capability information	.04	.37*** H5	.01	-.31**	-.04	.19**	-.01	.06
Activity information	-.28*	-.32**	.75*** H6	.49***	.33**	.07	.01	-.10
Organization size	-.13***	.09	-.05	-.11	-.03	.03	-.08	.05
Sales tenure	.15***	.12**	-.17**	.04	-.04	.05	-.04	-.11
Organization tenure	-.02	-.02	-.00	-.04	-.05	.01	-.01	.08
Identification				.17** H7	.83*** H9a	.82*** H9b	.40*** H9c	-.13 ns H9d
Compliance				.38*** H8	-.19*** H10a	-.13*** H10b	-.17** H10c	.82*** H10d

Discussion

In this research, we demonstrate that social information and output information, i.e., direct autonomy support provided by a salesperson's sales team and sales manager, is positively related to self-information (salesperson autonomous goal setting, monitoring, feedback). Self-information leads to identification with an organization presumably because salespeople experience their role in the organization as congruent with their own personal goals, values, and regulations. The organizational identification process is further enhanced by cultural information and capability information, i.e., more indirect autonomy support provided by the organization at large. Organization identification is positively related to salesperson performance in the short-term as well as having a positive relationship with long-term indicators of salesperson success (i.e., job satisfaction, loyalty, altruism), and a negative relationship with dysfunctional sales behaviors (e.g., gaming the system). Meanwhile, activity information, which is very commonly used in practice, is positively related to compliance (and negatively to identification). Although compliance has a strong positive link to performance in the short term, it also has negative relationships with job satisfaction, loyalty, and altruism and a positive relationship with dysfunctional behaviors.

Our findings have two main implications for SMCS theory. First, it may be important to understand the degree of autonomy that sales controls contain. Self-control has been deemed the most crucial form of control because it comes directly from the salesperson (Drucker 1954). Relatedly, it is also susceptible to the influence of all of the other sales controls that operate in the sales environment. Therefore, it appears imperative to understand how all of these other sales controls support (or do not support) the development of self-control. We demonstrate that social information and output information are positively associated with self-information. Second, the effects of output and activity control have been deemed somewhat equivocal because they both

positively influence salesperson performance. By identifying the processes through which sales performance is enhanced by sales controls, we first demonstrate that most sales controls demonstrate a positive path to identification, which positively impacts both short-term performance outcomes and long-term indicators of performance. We then show that activity controls may lead to short-term performance but have a deleterious influence on long-term indicators of salesperson success.

Importantly, sales managers may view this research as a wake-up call on salesperson performance management. Activity control has received much attention and support in both the academic literature and in practice. However, since the inception of the concept, we have made several gains in the way that it is conceptualized and measured (see Challagalla & Shervani 1996). Anecdotally, we have also witnessed the downside of tight activity control. Despite this, organizations continuously tighten activity control measures, particularly during times of uncertainty, as a way of mitigating risk perceptions. Based on our findings, we encourage sales managers to let go of activity controls. Rather, sales managers may work with salespeople to set individual output information, and sales teams to develop group objectives, values, and norms (i.e., social information) that guide salesperson behaviors. This may be the most effective way to encourage salespeople to develop their own activity goals, which will help them to identify with organizational objectives. This process can only be enhanced by a strong organizational culture (i.e., cultural information) that includes opportunities for salespeople to develop their individual skills and capabilities (i.e., capability information).

SALESPERSON'S PERFECTIONISM, JOB INVOLVEMENT, AND ADAPTIVE SELLING

Author: Jay Prakash Mulki

ABSTRACT

Perfectionism is a personality trait that makes individuals set very high standards for themselves and get obsessed with a fear of not being able to achieve those standards. Striving for the perfect solution can contribute to success provided fear of failure does not come in the way of trying innovative methods to reach the solution. Perfectionism is one of the personality traits that has not drawn much attention in sales research. This study explores how perfectionism can impact two of the key antecedents of sales performance, job involvement, and adaptive selling using a sample of 281 salespeople. Results indicate that while perfectionism positively impacts job involvement, its relationship with adaptive selling is negative. Managerial implications, limitations and future research directions are provided.

THE IMPACT OF CENTRALIZATION ON THE CREATIVITY AND PERFORMANCE OF SALESPERSONS

Author: Anurang Pant

ABSTRACT

This study tries to understand the effects of centralization on the creativity and performance of salespersons. The central objective of this study is to understand if and how tighter centralization of a salesperson's operations leads to more sales or less. In business research, centralization has been construed as a situation where superiors become increasingly involved in decision making and thereby, reduce lower-level employees' autonomy to respond to the needs of their job. Past research has shown differing relations between centralization and salesperson performance. We propose that centralization will be related negatively to a salesperson's performance. Limiting a salespersons' individual expression and autonomy makes that person less creative. Hence, we posit that creativity of the salesperson mediates the relationship between perceived centralization and salesperson's performance. Results from a small sample study support these two propositions. We recommend that both –from the point of personality of the salespersons and because of the type of tasks they need to perform, centralization should be avoided. Instead, processes that enhance creative selling need to be initiated for the salespersons' performance to be unleashed.

RETOOLING THE SALESFORCE VELOCITY: MANAGING TEAM PERFORMANCE IN B2B SALES

Authors: José Anselmo Pérez, Ananya Rajagopal

STRUCTURED ABSTRACT

Purpose: It is not hidden that the global health crisis originated in 2020 has impacted the global sales performance and has forced sales managers in rethinking strategies for implementing the escape velocity model among sales teams (Nigel et al., 1998). In physical sciences, escape velocity has been defined as the minimum speed that is needed by the object to escape the gravitational pull forces, letting the object free in the space. This concept of escape velocity adapted by the sales managers will induce the sales teams to strategically drive salesforces in order to escape the pull forces present in the macro-economic market environment. These pull forces may include a combination of political, economic, social, technological, environmental, and legal factors (PESTEL), which tend to act as negative driving forces limiting the growth perspective of the post pandemic market environment (Contreras et al., 2012).

This study focuses on analyzing and enhancing niche-based sales strategies as driving forces within the emerging organizations aimed at uplifting demand. The emerging organizations have challenged the existing paradigms of traditional market dynamics and are developing new strategies through pulling the market forces to enhance sale force performance. This study also analyzes the impact of macro-economic factors, market segmentation, escape velocity propensity (Yan et al., 2015), and minimum viable segment among innovative products of emerging enterprises in Mexico. The scope of the study has been expanded to analyze the impact of salesforce velocity in the gaining market share through implementation of market-oriented approach among business-to-business industrial segments.

Methodology: This study has been conducted using quantitative research method, by administering the structured instrument among the emerging companies with B2B sales orientation. The quantitative research instrument was developed to analyze the macroeconomic factors, market orientation, customer preferences, salesforce management, and propensity for repurchase. The structured research instrument was also aimed at understanding the influence of the above attributes on companies towards strategic sales orientation. Two focus group discussions with 6 and 8 respondents (senior sales executives), were conducted to collect information on attributes of salesforce management and strategic orientation of B2B firms. Information was collected from 72 sales representatives of emerging enterprises across five industrial segments (retail, technology, fashion and beauty, and food services) within the geographical expanse of Mexico. The data was subjected to statistical analysis process using SPSS v.25 to validate the following hypotheses:

H₁: The degree of success of market-oriented approach depends on the effective implementation of macro-economic forces.

H₂: Salesforce velocity has a direct impact on the micro-economic factors such as consumer awareness, propensity for repurchase, and organizational sales objectives.

H₃: Managing performance of sales teams is driven by internal sales objectives and hedonic perceptions among firms.

Findings: The data has been analyzed using factor analysis, linear regression model and non-parametric measure of correlation with Rho spearman, to validate the hypotheses. The regression coefficients have been computed through the following equation:

$$SF_{vel} = \alpha + \beta_1 Prop_{rep} + \beta_2 MacEc_{fac} + \beta_3 MicEc_{fac} + \beta_4 Hed_{per} + \beta_5 Sls_{obj} + \beta_6 Cst_{awr} + \beta_7 Sls_{perf} + \beta_8 Per_{val} + \varepsilon$$

Wherein,

SF_{vel} = Salesforce velocity

Per_{val} = Perceived value

$MacEc_{fac}$ = Macro-economic factors

$MicEc_{fac}$ = Micro-economic factors

Hed_{per} = Hedonic perceptions

$Prop_{rep}$ = Propensity of repurchase

Sls_{obj} = Sales objectives

Cst_{awr} = Customer awareness

Sls_{perf} = Sales performance

ε = error term

The study revealed that the macroeconomic factors affect the market dynamics, which has oriented the B2B consumers towards conscious consumeristic attitude ($\beta_2 MacEc_{fac} = 0.708, p < 0.01$). The conscious consumeristic attitude has negatively affected the hedonic perceptions ($\beta_4 Hed_{per} = -0.581, p < 0.05$) for high-priced products even though they gain relatively higher perceived value ($\beta_8 Per_{val} = 0.724, p < 0.01$). Thus, the salesforce velocity has an adverse effect on the propensity of repurchase ($\beta_1 Prop_{rep} = 0.304, p < 0.05$). The analysis of data suggests that salesforce of the emerging enterprises need to develop intensive customer relations to improve the repurchase of frugal innovative products within the niche markets. The inter-variable effectiveness was analyzed using spearman correlation, which revealed that hedonic perceptions and propensity of repurchase are closely associated ($r = 0.715, p < 0.001$). The results explained above are consistent with the hypotheses H₁ and H₃.

The study also revealed that the salesforce of emerging enterprises have directed their focus on generating customer awareness ($\beta_6 Cst_{awr} = 0.681, p < 0.05$) based on differentiating attributes of innovative products by emphasizing on the hedonic perceptions ($\beta_4 Hed_{per} = 0.811, p < 0.01$) and micro-economic factors ($\beta_3 MicEc_{fac} = 0.712, p < 0.01$). Therefore the salesforce velocity is synchronized with the propensity of repurchase leading to enhanced sales performance ($\beta_7 Sls_{perf} = 0.771, p < 0.01$). Results of the data analysis show that hedonic perceptions diminish consumer consciousness ($r = 0.595, p < 0.05$). In view of the above discussion of findings, the results are consistent with the hypotheses H₂ and H₃.

The salesforce of emerging enterprises follows market-oriented approach by substituting need-based values with hedonic perceptions. The sales objectives are reinforced by the strategic orientation of organizational leaders, who aim to drive changes in social and economic environment. Nevertheless, empowering salesforce through various retooling objectives not only reinforces customer relations but also enhances the propensity of repurchase among B2B firms.

Implications: The evolution of market forces in emerging economies are affected by the macro- and micro-economic factors that are continuously disrupting the market forces, which makes it difficult to aim at stable selling strategies oriented towards expanding customer outreach. The firms may need to explore markets beyond boundaries to gain competitive leverage and reorient the traditional sales strategies through enhanced customer awareness, perceived use value, and critical evaluation between utilitarian and hedonic perceptions. Such strategy would help emerging firms to gain strategic advantages by offering innovative products in larger markets as against the established brands.

Originality/Value: In Mexico, the sales orientation has traditionally been directed from niche market segment to the big mass or premium segments, which lacks in development of customer value chain and repeat buying behavior. Such sales orientation hinders the velocity with which the sales teams must launch in the market. The impact of macro- and micro-economic factors on the sales trajectory of emerging enterprises in the post pandemic market conditions has not been well explored in the previous studies. Therefore, this paper contributes to the existing literature on retooling the salesforce velocity and driving sales performance by enhancing market opportunities and propensity of repurchase among business-to-business enterprises.

**IT TAKES TWO TO TANGO: A BAYESIAN MULTIGROUP APPROACH
EXAMINING THE IMPACT OF CUSTOMER TRUSTWORTHINESS ON SALES
MANAGEMENT DECISIONS**

Authors: Konstantinos Rigopoulos; Henry Robben, Kostas Kaminakis, and Ed Peelen

ABSTRACT

This study examines the current sales landscape, highlighting the effect of customer trustworthiness in B2B sales. A three by two experimental design expands the current literature by investigating the impact of specific sales approaches on sales performance through effective critical incident resolution and customer gratitude generation. Using survey data from 190 salespeople and responding to the calls for the adoption of more robust, non-parametric analyses, a Bayesian multigroup SEM approach is followed. The findings suggest that creating customer gratitude can leverage the customer-supplier relationship outcome only when both parties aim at a trustworthy and long-term relationship.

**FACTORS MANIFESTING THE CHALLENGES OF AI-IMPLEMENTATIONS:
EXPERIENCES OF DIFFERENT ACTORS IN THE FINANCIAL INDUSTRY
ECO-SYSTEM**

Authors: Nirosha Nilmini Sathiskumar, and Poul Houman Andersen

ABSTRACT

Purpose: Firstly, to identify the factors that manifested in the challenges of AI implementations that are experienced by different actors in the financial industry eco-system. Secondly, to provide recommendations to the senior-level managers in the financial industry for successful AI implementations.

Approach/Design/Methodology: We employ a qualitative research methodology in terms of expert interviews with 12 experts in the financial industry. (Managers leading AI centers of excellence, Data science engineers who provide AI solutions to financial industries, and financial advisors)

Findings: The challenges of AI implementations experienced by managers leading the AI centers of excellence and data science engineers are manifested by information, autonomy, interaction, and innovation tensions. Whereas the challenges perceived by the financial advisors are manifested by innovation tensions of AI implementations. Also, there is a symmetric link between the tensions influencing challenges experienced by the managers leading the AI centers of excellence and the data science engineers based on their job roles in the financial organization's ecosystem.

DIMENSIONS OF VALUE BASED SELLING-CURRENT AND ASPIRED LEVEL & THE IMPACT ON PERFORMANCE

Authors: Poul von Wowern, Piotr Kwiatek, and Robert Füreder

ABSTRACT

Previous studies highlighted the positive effect of various components of Value-Based Selling (VBS) on profitability and competitiveness. However, there seems to be a paucity of research concerning the impact of VBS on company performance on a more granular level. Based on 9 dimensions of VBS we evaluate empirical data collected from 275 Danish and Austrian respondents that operate in B2B markets. We find that two dimensions, Salespeople Skills and Sales Training, have the highest impact on company performance. Further, we find that there is potential for advancement on these two dimensions as well as an aspiration among salespeople to advance.

ADVANCING SALES EDUCATION AND RESEARCH IN CANADIAN UNIVERSITIES

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STRUCTURED ABSTRACT

Introduction

Sales education and research in post-secondary institutions play a vital role in effectively developing selling skills and behaviors among students, ultimately assisting them in making informed career choices and achieving early sales success. (Knight et al., 2021; Bolander et al., 2014; Loe & Inks, 2014). Research by Bolander et al. (2014) showed that graduates of university sales programs are better prepared for sales roles than their non-educated counterparts, with increased knowledge and practice of specific selling behaviors. The authors identified a positive relationship between university sales education and sales performance among recent graduates who generate higher revenues for their organizations with lower overall retention costs (Bolander et al., 2014). The results highlight the importance of sales education and research in business curricula as the benefits to sales students are substantial in the professional selling function.

The sales profession is significant in Canada, yet only three university and four community college sales programs in Canada are recognized by the Sales Education Foundation (2022) as being designed to effectively prepare students for careers in this field, while there are 210 accredited programs operating globally. Moreover, there is a lack of research on teaching sales in Canadian universities, particularly regarding analytical skills and selling in the digital environment despite their impacts on sales success (Peesker et al., 2022; Herman & McAndrew, 2021).

While sales education is becoming more popular in Canada, there is a lack of empirical evidence on its effectiveness in the Canadian context. To ensure that students have access

to the necessary training and education to succeed in their careers, as highlighted by Bolander et al. (2014), Canadian universities should embrace these development opportunities. Furthermore, Nielsen and Cummins (2019) discuss the benefits of partnerships between universities, businesses and sales programs, providing valuable insights and areas for further research into the effectiveness of sales education which can be applied to the Canadian context. It appears that Canadian universities could collaborate and partner with businesses and sales organizations more to provide students with real-world experience and opportunities to apply their sales skills beyond the classroom.

Since sales education in Canadian universities remains a largely unexplored topic in sales research despite its institutional and practical significance, we applied for a SSHRC connections grant to bring together Canadian professors and industry leaders together to collectively delve into this important topic. In May 2022, a conference on advancing sales education and research in Canadian universities was hosted by Toronto Metropolitan University in partnership with HEC Montréal and Ivey, with support from the Government of Canada SSHRC funding and sponsors from the Ted Rogers Sales Leadership Program. The conference provided a platform for Canadian post-secondary professors and industry leaders to engage in meaningful discussions on sales trends in the digital economy and sales education and research in Canadian universities. These discussions have set the foundation for conducting research on sales education in Canada to ensure we provide students with the necessary skills and experience to succeed in their sales careers.

Objective

The primary objective of the conference and the subsequent research is to provide valuable insights to sales educators in Canada. Specifically, the aim is to understand the future of sales in Canada and how sales education programs can be adapted to prepare students for success in the dynamic and evolving sales landscape. The ultimate goal is to

ensure that sales students are equipped with the necessary skills and knowledge to excel in their careers after graduation.

Methods

The two-day conference was a collaborative effort between Canadian university professors, industry professionals, and researchers aimed at advancing sales education and research in Canadian universities. It consisted of group discussions, panel discussions, and presentations, all focused on improving sales education and research in Canada. Guided breakout sessions were conducted to address specific focus questions related to the digital sales environment, as determined by SSHRC and listed in Appendix A (See Appendix A). The conference discussions centered on various topics, including selling in the digital economy, which was identified as an emerging trend due to the digitization of sales roles. Nineteen sales professors from eleven Canadian universities engaged in group discussions to explore emerging sales trends in these focused areas, and their ideas and insights were captured through video recordings and transcribed for analysis.

This data was included in the SSHRC conference proceedings. For this research paper, we analyzed the rich secondary source data generated during these discussions. We employed a thematic analysis approach, coding the data and extracting themes and insights to explore the state of the digital sales environment in Canada. The rigor of our methodology was ensured by having two researchers independently analyze the data and then discussing and agreeing on the final set of themes and insights.

Findings

The findings of this study suggest that the sales profession is evolving towards a more consultative role in Canada, where sales professionals must effectively use data analytics to create customized solutions for their clients. The discussions held during the study

emphasized the importance of self-training and upskilling, using technology to streamline sales processes, and embracing diversity to create high-performing sales teams. However, the data also identified several challenges that sales professionals face, including the need to bridge the gap between theoretical education and practical experience, navigating generational differences and varying work styles among team members, effectively managing remote work arrangements, and providing support for salespeople mental health. To address these challenges, it is important for sales organizations and university sales programs to prioritize ongoing training and development opportunities, provide the necessary technological infrastructure and tools, and promote open communication and collaboration within sales teams. By doing so, sales professionals and sales students can stay relevant and adapt to the changing sales landscape, while also working in a supportive and inclusive work environment that promotes teamwork and drives sales success.

During the breakout session, it was recognized that emphasizing teaching centered around the entire customer journey holds importance. It was suggested that we must carefully consider how to effectively impart this knowledge to ensure that sales students bring value in the evolving sales landscape. Furthermore, the discussion highlighted the significance of teaching analytical skills within the digital selling environment, leveraging technology tools. .

“when we talk about the process, we need to make sure that our students understand the whole customer journey and how through this process they will deliver value and add value.....also is there a way that companies can leverage different digital platforms to be able to teach those skills to their sales students? We think that there are other opportunities in teaching analytics, teaching product expertise, and having the sales people have the right tools and materials at their hands when they're in meetings with clients” (Group 2, personal communication, May 10, 2022).

Additionally, the discussion emphasized the importance of bridging the gap between classrooms and the actual sales environment, particularly in the Canadian business school context. Moreover, there was a recognition of the significance of increasing touchpoints for sales in Canadian universities and enhancing the practical experiences of sales

students.

“When you teach sales to students, most sales exchanges of value that we’re talking about are B2B sales, but students have never seen B2B sales. So how could we better show them what it even is” (Group 3, personal communication, May 10, 2022).

“I think most of us that have teaching experience, are seeing students that are seeing a touchpoint with a sales course maybe once in the BComm or BBA, maybe twice. Compare that to any BComm or BBA student that is getting 2 or 3 accounting courses, 3 to 4 marketing courses, there aren’t many touchpoints with sales and that would be a nice thing to change.” (Group 4, personal communication, May 10, 2022)

The conference and subsequent research provide valuable insights into the evolving sales landscape and contribute to the advancement of sales education in Canada. These findings can inform the development of effective educational programs which add value to help sales professionals and students navigate the rapidly changing digital sales environment.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the rapidly evolving digital sales environment has posed numerous questions for Canadian salespeople, sales leaders, and professors in both business and academic settings. To address these concerns, we conducted an analysis of the data collected during a conference dedicated to advancing sales education in Canadian universities. Drawing upon this data, we have formulated several suggestions and ideas for navigating the dynamic market changes. Moreover, the conference facilitated active engagement between sales professors and industry professionals, allowing for an exploration of emerging topics and strategies pertaining to the development and promotion of sales education across Canada. A significant outcome of the conference was the establishment of an alliance among Canadian university sales professors, fostering the exchange of ideas and best practices to drive the advancement of sales education and research in the country which will help enable future success. Through collaborative efforts in this conference and future endeavors, invaluable insights have emerged, paving

the way for the proposal of innovative solutions to the challenges currently faced by the Canadian sales profession.

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Appendix A

Conference Discussion Questions

Sales Trends in the Digital Economy

1. What are the key digital trends impacting sales?
2. How are shifting demographics and other trends creating new challenges for sales?
3. How do leading organizations create high performing sales tech enabled sales teams?
4. How can we utilize data analytics to improve sales performance?

Sales Education and Research in Canadian Universities

5. What are the knowledge gaps and the implications for teaching and learning, especially in a Canadian context?
6. What are the key opportunities and challenges of sales education in Canadian universities?

UNDERSTANDING SALES INNOVATIVENESS THROUGH SALES MANAGERS' ACCOUNTS

Authors: Katariina Ylönen, Saara Julkunen, and Anu Puusa

STRUCTURED ABSTRACT

Global competition and both organizational changes and changes in the competitive business environment (Reichstein-Scholz et al. 2021), compounded by rapidly changing technology and shortening product life cycles (Ingram et al. 2005), challenge sales organizations (Smith et al. 2012; Evans et al. 2012), change their strategic role (Flaherty and Pappas 2009; Storbacka et al. 2009; Reichstein-Scholz et al. 2021), and require them to engage in transformation (Menguc et al. 2011) and a firm's innovation process (Wang and Miao 2015). Innovation has become a major opportunity for firms to improve business growth, performance, sustainable competitiveness, and internationalization (Diaz-Fernandez et al. 2017; Tian et al. 2018; Le and Lei 2019; Bucciari et al. 2020). Innovation is often traditionally attributed to the R&D function (Wang and Miao 2015), but to achieve its full potential, innovation should be extended to cover all an organization's activities, including sales units (Salaman and Storey 2002; Edwards et al. 2023).

Sales innovativeness reflects salespeople's perceptions of their organization's adaptability and willingness to consider novel ways of solving sales-related problems (Ferdinand and Wahyuningsih 2018; Locander et al. 2018). It is identified as a driver of sales performance (Ferdinand and Wahyuningsih 2018), and it may help sales teams cope with external changes by creating and accepting newness (Evans et al. 2012). Sales innovativeness also assists in coping with customer-related changes and demands (Evans et al. 2012) and provides more tools for sustainable development in sales (Bucciari et al. 2020). However, research on sales innovativeness has remained relatively scarce (Matsuo 2009; Martinaityte and Sacramento 2013; Edwards et al. 2023). Our study addresses this gap by exploring sales managers' understandings of innovativeness in the sales context.

As managerial and organizational support is crucial for innovativeness and employee-driven innovative initiatives (Kuratko et al. 2021; Edwards et al. 2023), how managers perceive innovation is a critical factor in its execution (Salaman and Storey 2002; Kuratko et al. 2021). While employees in organizations that encourage experimentation, tolerate failure, and support staff-developed entrepreneurial initiatives are more likely to generate innovation (Edwards et al. 2023), innovativeness in changing and cross-pressured operating environments can be constrained by weak managerial capability (Wu et al. 2020).

Sales managers therefore play a critical role in enhancing innovativeness in their teams (Matsuo 2009; Edwards et al. 2023).

In this study, we focus on the following research question: How do sales managers conceptualize sales innovativeness in the B2B sales context? Empirically, we conducted 23 thematic interviews with sales managers in small and medium-sized Nordic B2B companies and analyzed them by applying discourse analysis methods (Ritchie et al. 2013). Based on the preliminary findings, we found that sales managers must reflect on their own understanding of sales innovativeness to identify its supporting and constraining dimensions and its influence on supporting innovativeness in their sales teams.

THEORETICAL REVIEW

Sales Innovativeness

The theory of innovation focuses on the issues that help organizations change and renew themselves (Newman et al. 2020). This study is based on Crossan and Apaydin's (2010) definition of the concept of innovation. They state that innovation is the "production or adoption, assimilation, and exploitation of a value-added novelty in economic and social spheres; renewal and enlargement of products, services, and markets; development of new methods of production; and establishment of new management systems. It is both a process and an outcome." This definition includes both internally conceived and externally adopted innovations, highlighting innovation as more than a creative process by including application. Innovativeness is instead defined as an organization's proclivity, receptivity, and inclination to adopt unfamiliar ways and ideas (Kim et al. 2011).

Sales innovativeness (Ferdinand and Wahyuningsih 2018) and creative selling (Miao and Wang 2016) are seen as included in entrepreneurial sales activity that could enhance business-to-business sales performance (Morris et al. 1990). Sales innovativeness reflects salespeople's perceptions of their organization's adaptability and willingness to consider novel ways of solving sales-related problems (Ferdinand and Wahyuningsih 2018; Locander et al. 2018). Salespeople thus both build the innovation climate through their own actions and are at the same time exposed to the prevailing climate (Newman 2019). Creative selling refers to the salesperson's ability to identify problems and develop creative solutions that satisfy the customer (Groza et al. 2016; Edwards et al. 2023). A salesperson is considered creative when they create and evaluate new solutions to existing problems, approach problem solving differently, and take the initiative in solving existing difficulties, thereby improving sales performance (Miao and Wang 2016).

Sales innovation can manifest itself by introducing new products/services or changes to sales processes through technology (Matsuo 2009; De Jong, Verbeke and Nijssen 2014). Sales innovation can be particularly conducive to market-driven innovation (Salaman and Storey 2002; Ferdinand and Wahyuningsih 2018), and salespeople have been found to directly influence product innovation processes (Judson et al. 2006; Joshi 2010). Innovativeness is an important driver of salespeople's performance (Ferdinand and Wahyuningsih 2018), as technical and complex products may require new ways of selling (Evans et al. 2007). Innovativeness may help sales teams cope with external changes, both by creating and accepting newness and through customer-related changes and demands (Evans et al. 2012) to provide more tools for sustainable development (Buccieri et al. 2020).

Because the sales environment is full of new technologies, customer requirements, and new forms of internal and external cooperation, and a firm's relationships with its customers are increasingly perceived as a key component of its competitive advantage (Reichstein-Scholz et al. 2021), sales managers need creative salespeople who have complex problem-solving abilities and can apply new technologies to new products and services that meet customer needs (Evans et al. 2012; Edwards et al. 2023). Managerial support is crucial for innovativeness (Hohenberg and Homburg 2016; Kuratko et al. 2021), as staff in organizations that support innovative initiatives are more likely to produce innovation. If the organization values innovation, salespeople are more likely to generate new ideas, whereas without organizational and managerial support, salespeople view creative selling and innovativeness as too risky (Wang and Miao 2015). In addition, sales departments are more innovative when salespeople are evaluated based on their behavior and actions rather than the outcome (Matsuo 2009). Managers must therefore choose an evaluation approach that supports innovativeness and give salespeople significant latitude to use creative sales techniques. They must also be aware of the influence of their leadership on the level of innovativeness (Wang and Netemeyer 2004).

Furthermore, sales teams operate in a special position compared to other departments in the firm, as they regularly interact with customers, partners, and competitors (Evans et al. 2012). Supporting their innovativeness and encouraging their initiative can therefore produce significant competitive advantages for the company (Ferdinand and Wahyuningsih 2018). Salespeople often work physically in different locations from others and have different opportunities to detect a customer's future needs (Kim et al. 2011). This is a unique position for identifying market intelligence, detecting tacit signals, and gaining important customer and competitor knowledge that can drive the firm's innovation process (Ingram et al. 2005; Wang and Miao 2015; Ferdinand and Wahyuningsih 2018). External communication (including customers), the communication systems, and sharing and using customer knowledge within the organization positively influence the level of organizational innovativeness and innovation success (Hult, Hurley and Knight 2004; Kim

et al. 2011). Having a complete and thorough knowledge of customer needs, investing in technology for customer relationship management, and having an effective knowledge management system provide the necessary tools for connecting with customers, acquiring knowledge, and using it to find innovative solutions to customers' problems (Menguc et al. 2011; Gonçalves et al. 2023).

METHODOLOGY

The study is methodologically guided by the philosophy of social constructionism (Ritchie et al. 2013), the ontological assumption of subjectivism, and the subjective epistemological assumption (Eriksson and Kovalainen 2016). In social constructionism, reality is seen as socially produced and constructed through interaction (Ritchie et al. 2013). The use of interpretive qualitative methodology can provide a holistic understanding of less studied phenomena (Birkinshaw et al. 2011) and can reveal individual and collective insights (Doz 2011). In its analysis, this study focuses on discourses (Denzin and Lincoln 2011) that are understood as comprising meaning frames (Edwards 1997). Sales innovativeness is pursued to be understood within the framework of sales managers' individual consciousness, subjectivity, and understandings and to describe, interpret, and understand the phenomenon of sales innovativeness.

B2B sales managers were chosen as informants for this study because the role of leadership at all levels of an organization is paramount for spearheading innovation as a process and maintaining its momentum until innovation ensues (Crossan and Apaydin 2010). It is therefore important to comprehend the understanding of the phenomenon of innovation via those who have the most influence in sales teams, i.e., sales managers. The empirical data were collected in two rounds, using thematic interviews. The first interviews were conducted with eight sales managers in small and medium-sized Nordic B2B companies in 2013, while the second data collection round is being conducted in 2022–2023 through interviews with 15 sales managers in small and medium-sized ICT-field Nordic B2B companies. By collecting extensive material in two sets, we wanted to ensure that the picture of the phenomenon created in the study was rich and allowed to evolve over time. The data are analyzed by applying inductive content analysis to specify the data, which are then analyzed and conceptualized using discourse analysis.

PRELIMINARY FINDINGS

The analysis and acquisition of the material is currently progressing. Part of the existing material has been subjected to a preliminary analysis, which allows us to outline preliminary discourses that emerge from examining the reality. These discourses reflect the understanding of innovation constructed by sales managers. The preliminary findings

suggest that the picture of innovation in sales is not unambiguous, but multidimensional. Most sales managers were in no doubt about the importance of innovativeness for their sales organization, and one of them stated that “*sales is always such. You should always figure something new; new ways to sell, new products, or new ideas which to sell.*” At this stage of the analysis, three different discourses emerge from the managers’ speeches through which innovation in sales was discussed: *innovation at the customer interface*; *innovation as development*; and *innovation as chaos*.

The *innovation at the customer interface* discourse emphasizes customer orientation and customer consideration in all the organization’s decision making. This builds an image of sales innovativeness that aims for conversational behavior that considers the customer’s needs and wishes. An innovative sales team seeks to understand the customer and adapts its own activities to meet the customer’s needs. One sales manager stated that “*the best innovative salespersons, they don’t have technical education. Instead, we have to invest in the essential part of selling: communication and reason recognition.*” Innovative behavior at the customer interface was seen as requiring a certain degree of freedom in the execution of work. A climate that supported innovation was seen as having an impact on the meaningfulness of the individual’s work, the freedom to plan and carry it out, and thus commitment to the work. The discourse emphasizes the importance of the individual salesperson’s job description and their opportunity to influence the content and implementation of work. The chosen leadership style should therefore support free and flexible approaches and individuality in job descriptions. Furthermore, the discourse states that management systems should include evaluation methods that weight other than sales-related activities, such as building long-term customer relationships and sharing knowledge.

In the *innovation as development* discourse, innovation was understood as inherent to sales work and to mean the envisioning of the market’s future. The discourse describes a sales team that seeks to understand the customer’s future direction and needs and to keep itself informed of market developments. One manager viewed that “*innovative sales, as I see it at grass-roots level, is noticing the small influencing issues.*” For instance, product development was considered an issue in which sales innovativeness manifests itself and an innovative solution was described to include customer-specific customization and flexibility. The discourse creates a new sales perspective by blurring the traditional task boundaries between sales, marketing, and product development. It emphasizes the need to acquire knowledge from both the market and the customers and to deliver it for the use of other teams in the organization. Sales innovativeness thus serves as a means of accessing information to achieve an organization’s innovation objectives. In this situation, the sales team acts as a knowledge broker between the customer and company. On the other hand, the discourse highlights the prevailing power relations within the organization, which are seen in sales managers’ reflection on whether the management team hears or ignores their message about customers or markets.

The third discourse focuses on the limitations of innovation and the uncontrollable space it creates. This discourse, *innovation as chaos*, highlights the chaotic nature of innovation and emphasizes that the demand for innovation creates uncontrollable behavior, thereby damaging the company's internal stability and structures. One manager stated that "*if you act too innovatively...we surely have examples of cases in which a salesperson has ended up with very difficult solutions.*" In this context, innovativeness was partly seen as an arbitrary behavior of salespeople, in which common agreements, rules, or product/service features did not constrain the sales process and other sales activities. To avoid the chaos, a salesperson must be aware of the possibilities of production and the costs of changes in products before customized products are offered to the customers.

DISCUSSION

The discourses on innovation based on the speech of sales managers can be detected as both replicating and extending the notions of innovation found in the literature (Crossan and Apaydin 2010). The emphasis on the importance of knowledge in sales innovativeness strongly reiterates the features of the organizational innovation framework, such as individual and organizational learning and knowledge management, which are seen as the basis for organizational innovation capability (Hurley and Hult 1998; Gonçalves et al. 2023). At the same time, the *innovation as development* discourse challenges the traditional view of the role of sales in an organization by building an image of the sales team as an active acquirer of customer and market knowledge and facilitator of innovation. These discourses build an image of the significant role sales play in relation to the organization's ability to innovate. This contrasts with the traditional view of the role of sales, which sees them as an operational rather than a strategic activity (Reichstein-Scholz et al. 2021).

Moreover, the emphasis on knowledge sharing reveals the power relations within the organization that are reflected in the discourse—for example, in the discussion of whether the sales manager is heard in the management team. Sales managers mentioned situations in which they had tried to draw the attention of the management team to weak signals about customer needs but had not been heard, or in which it had taken considerable time to push the issue. Through this discourse, it is possible to explore the power relations that influence participation and decision making at the organizational level (Judson et al. 2006; Storbacka et al. 2009; Edwards et al. 2023).

The study increases the understanding of sales innovation, its dimensions, and its manifestation. It contributes to the understanding of the role of sales in supporting the organizational capacity for innovation and the changing strategic role of sales in innovation. It can also contribute to the innovation literature by integrating the sales dimension more broadly into the innovation framework. In the future, it will be important to investigate the power structures that exist in organizations in relation to the role of sales as a strategic innovation actor. As well, more research, also quantitative, on creativity and

innovativeness as drivers of sales performance and sales team development will be needed in the future.

Practitioners can utilize the findings to build more innovative sales teams. Sales managers need to reflect on and expand their understandings of innovation through the discourses this study has identified. If the current levels of innovativeness are to be improved, it is essential to identify, question, and challenge inhibiting and limiting practices and perceptions within the sales team's practices, structures, and management. As previous research identifies salespeople's innovativeness as a driver of sales performance, sales managers need to critically consider whether their evaluation practices, reward systems, working practices, and leadership support a climate in which creative selling and innovativeness can occur. References are available upon request.