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A Framework for Configuring Sales Support Structure

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Structured Abstract:

Purpose: To examine when it is appropriate to provide dedicated support for a sales activity, and in cases where support is desirable, to explore the choice between core team support and external support.

Design/methodology/approach: Sales transactions typically require a diverse range of sales activities, including customer contact, scheduling appointments, internal meetings, processing orders, and preparing financing applications. This research develops a framework for understanding how to structure sales support for specific sales activities.

Findings: Each sales activity has four dimensions, 1) workload, 2) customization, 3) complexity, and 4) prequalification risk. Support structure (self-support, core team support, and external support) moderates the influence of the four sales activity dimensions on sales activity performance and salesperson role stress. These, in turn, impact overall sales performance.

Research limitations/implications: This research presents a broad conceptual model of sales support structure. Further research should test this framework using empirical data.

Practical implications: Normative recommendations are made for managers about how to allocate sales activities to sales support.

Originality/value: This research proposes four relevant dimensions of sales activities that should be considered when allocating sales activities to members of the selling center. The framework will help managers, academicians, and business students understand how sales support structure impacts sales performance.

Keywords: Sales support, sales transactions, role stress

Article Classification: Conceptual paper
Introduction

It is often necessary to use sales teams to effectively and efficiently meet the needs of customers (Brown et al., 2005). For example, Weitz and Bradford (1999, p. 244) suggested that team-based selling is important “…because an individual salesperson does not possess the knowledge or intrafirm influence to propose and implement a program that has the potential for building a competitive advantage for the buyer-seller dyad.” Yet salespeople often believe that they are spending too much time on non-productive activities, such as technical support, approving sales, paperwork, internal meetings and data entry (e.g., Barber and Tietfe, 2008; Jaramillo et al., 2006; Cummings, 2004). Accordingly, many firms are replacing “lone wolf” salespeople with relationship managers who are supported by a diverse group of employees inside and outside of the sales department (Bradford et al., 2010). Moncrief and Marshall (2005, p. 16) explain that salespeople are “very expensive assets” and a salesperson’s time is better spent making calls on qualified prospects and building existing customer relationships than on less productive activities. However, to our knowledge, extant research has not identified when it is appropriate to provide support for specific sales activities. This is important because it is not necessarily more efficient to have employees specialize in a subset of sales activities given the costs associated with providing sales support (e.g., Pinker and Shumsky, 2000).

Previous research has identified a number of selling conditions in which it is beneficial for multiple employees to work together in the sales process, such as high workload (Jones et al., 2005), high customization (Moon and Armstrong, 1994; Jones et al., 2005), high complexity (Üstüner and Godes, 2006; Pinker and Shumsky, 2000; Weitz and Bradford, 1999), and high risk (Moon and Armstrong, 1994). We contend that individual sales activities vary across similar dimensions—workload, customization, complexity, and prequalification risk. Hence, some activities may have a higher workload, others may have higher customization, and still others might be relatively high on both. We argue that the appropriateness of assigning a sales activity to a particular sales support structure will vary based on these underlying dimensions. For example, if the workload of an activity is low, it may be most appropriate to have salespeople support themselves; yet, if the workload of an activity is very high, salespeople would have...
difficulty performing the activity well and would be more prone to role stress (Cullen et al., 2008; Singh, 2000).

When sales support is necessary, it can be provided within the sales force or by an external group. Moon and Armstrong (1994) explain that the selling center includes all of the sales and non-sales employees who participate in the selling process. Customer transactions often require a variety of sales activities, such as: customer contact / selling, manual labor, delivery, installation, technical consultation, data entry / reporting, coordination or prequalification (e.g., Barber and Tietje, 2008; Moncrief et al., 2006; Sumrall, 1992). It is possible to assign some of these tasks to a core sales team and others to external centralized departments. However, only the core sales team is required to participate in the sales transaction (Moon and Armstrong, 1994). Thus, salespeople do not have control of sales activities handled outside of the core selling team, even if the sales activity plays a key role in the sales transaction. Accordingly, Üstüner and Godes (2006) argue that managers should consider creating dedicated support teams when product offerings are complex so that salespeople do not have to spend time coordinating intra-organizational networks.

To our knowledge, extant literature has not systematically examined how sales activities should be delegated within the selling center. Hence, while it is acknowledged that salespeople often receive support, the questions remain, “When is it appropriate to provide dedicated support for a specific sales activity?” and, “If dedicated support is appropriate, why assign sales activities to external departments if it is more difficult for salespeople?” Thus, from the existing literature it is not clear when it is appropriate for sales activities to be the responsibility of salespeople (self-support), a cross-functional selling team (core team support), or a centralized external department (external support). Therefore, in this study, we will examine the conditions in which it is appropriate to provide sales support and whether the support should be part of the core selling team or an external group. Afterwards, we present managerial guidelines for allocating sales activities and then discuss directions for future research.
Sales Support

Sales support structure

Moncrief et al. (2006) explicitly identified 8.6% of the sales force as dedicated sales support. Similarly, Sumrall (1992) identified “sales assistants” and “sales administrators” as having a supportive role in selling transactions. However, the selling center also consists of non-sales employees operating outside of sales department control (Moon and Armstrong, 1994). Rapp (1989, p. 7) explains that servicing some customers requires “dozens of people, both inside and outside” of the organization “in order to sell and then install a project.” Moon and Armstrong (1994) provide a list of possible roles played during the sales transaction including initiators (individuals who first identify a sales opportunity), coordinators (individuals who ensure that all selling center members work together effectively), resources (individuals who provide information or expertise), approvers (individuals who review and monitor the work done by others), and implementers (individuals who provide services to implement the sales transaction). Also, Tellefsen and Eyuboglu (2002, p. 159) identify a number of support personnel who exert a strong influence on the buyer's experience, including “credit managers (who set credit limits), lawyers (who specify contracts), engineers (who develop product specifications), information services managers (who coordinate data transfers), order processing clerks (who control the timing of order entry), production personnel (who set deadlines for incoming orders), and distribution personnel (who allocate scarce products among customers).” Hence, literature demonstrates that employees inside and outside of the sales department provide help with sales activities.

Consistent with these studies, we propose that there are three types of sales support structures, 1) self-support, in which salespeople are responsible for the sales activity themselves and provide support to one another as needed, 2) core team support, which are cross-functional selling teams under the direction of a sales manager, and 3) external support, in which external centralized departments provide support for the sales force. We now provide details about each of these sales support structures.

Self-support: In the self-support structure, salespeople are trained to handle sales activities themselves and can provide support to each other, as needed. Pinker and
Shumsky (2000) explain that generalists, salespeople who receive no support on activities, have fewer bottlenecks in the sales process because they are able to help customers (and each other) at any stage of the sales process; hence, self-support may be most efficient for many sales activities.

*Core team support:* This structure integrates sales support activities into the core selling team. Üstüner and Godes (2006, p. 109), explain that when salespeople rely on external sales support, “a salesperson might justifiably feel frazzled trying to cultivate the right networks for creating various customers’ solutions,” and then suggest that, when appropriate, managers set up a dedicated support team. Similarly, Moon and Armstrong (1999) explain that the “core selling team” is a relatively permanent cross-functional team with selling responsibilities. Core selling teams are becoming increasingly common (Moncrief and Marshall, 2005). For example, one large medical/dental supply firm uses core team support when selling major equipment to doctors and dentists. The core sales team is comprised of a salesperson responsible for prospecting and selling to customers, technical specialists responsible for delivering and installing major equipment, and coordinators responsible for managing the schedules of the core team and any external support that is needed.

*External support:* In the external support structure, sales support for activities is provided by a centralized department outside of the sales chain of command. This structure is comprised of units outside of the sales department’s control. To illustrate, risk assessment for commercial lending is generally conducted by an external underwriter who has little or no direct contact with selling agents.

**Sales activities**

Barber and Tietje (2008) list a number of sales activities that occur during transactions including: technical support, scheduling appointments, internal meetings, processing orders, submitting order confirmations, and preparing financing applications. We contend that each sales activity varies on four underlying dimensions: 1) *workload*, the time and effort required to complete the activity, 2) *customization*, the degree to
which the activity must be adapted to fit each specific transaction, 3) *complexity*, the intricacy and difficulty of completing the activity, and 4) *prequalification risk*, the importance of the activity for selecting desirable customers. In this section, we discuss each of the four sales activity dimensions and propose how sales support structure (i.e., self-support, core team support, and external support) moderates these dimensions to impact sales activity performance and role stress. The model is shown in Figure 1.

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*Workload*

One characteristic of each sales activity is its workload per sales transaction. DiDomenico and Nussbaum (2008, p. 977) define workload as the “cost incurred by an individual, given their capacities, while achieving a particular level of performance on a task with specific demands.” Congruent with their definition, we conceptualize workload as the cost in time and effort incurred by individuals to complete a sales activity. In some cases, activities involve a high workload. For instance, installation of new machinery may require several trained technicians working for multiple hours in order to ready the equipment for use. Alternately, some transactions require minimal work, such as selling construction materials to contractors, which may only require loading the contractor’s truck.

Consistent with Chandler’s (1962) framework, we argue that when the structure of sales support fits the dimensions of sales activities, such as workload, the performance of the sales activity should increase. Sales activity performance is defined as the timely completion of the activity at a quality which is sufficient for the needs of the buyer and the seller at the lowest reasonable cost. Hence, there are three characteristics of activity performance, 1) timeliness, the degree to which an activity is finished when it is needed, 2) quality, how well the activity is completed, and 3) cost efficiency, how expensive the sales activity is to complete. Sales activities are time sensitive because they need to be completed during the sales transaction. The faster that each sales activity is completed, the more quickly the sales transaction process can continue. When there is not enough labor to work on a sales activity, then either the employees responsible for the activity...
will not be able to complete it in a timely manner, or else the quality will suffer in an attempt to rush. Hence, when the workload of a sales activity is too high for salespeople to handle comfortably, self-support will no longer be viable and the activity will require dedicated support, whether on the core team or in an external department. Therefore, we expect that core team support and external support will perform high workload sales activities better than self-support.

P1: When a sales activity’s workload is high, using dedicated sales support (i.e., core team or external support) will result in higher sales activity performance than using self-support.

Additionally, organizational support has been shown to decrease role stress (Hamwi et al., 2011), so the support provided to salespeople should also impact role stress. The two main components of role stress are role conflict and role ambiguity (MacKenzie et al., 1998; Sager and Wilson, 1995). Although role conflict and role ambiguity have often been treated as separate concepts, research has shown that they are strongly interrelated (Behrman and Perreault, 1984). Role conflict is the degree to which salespeople feel that the expectations and demands of their job are incompatible, and that they are unable to satisfy all the demands simultaneously (Karatepe et al., 2006). Role ambiguity is the degree to which salespeople do not have enough information to know what is expected of them (Boles and Babin, 1994).

Heavy workloads have been shown to increase employee stress (Cullen et al., 2008; Singh, 2000). The greater the workload of a sales activity, the more time salespeople must spend on that activity. Salespeople must balance maintaining effective customer relationships, managing accounts, generating revenue, developing new customers, sharing information internally, and pursuing ongoing personal development (Tellefsen and Eyuboglu, 2002; Behrman and Perreault, 1982). As the workload of any single sales activity increases, it makes it more difficult for salespeople to pursue other activities. Hence, the more time salespeople must spend on any single activity, the more role conflict they should feel and the more ambiguous it will be about how much time salespeople ought to be spending on the activity.
The more support salespeople receive for each activity, the more that salespeople should be able to balance their time and job duties (Ahearne et al., 2004). For example, providing salespeople support on order processing allows salespeople to spend more time managing and servicing customers (Hill and Swenson, 1994). Hamwi et al. (2011) found that the more organizational support salespeople are provided, the lower their role stress. Hence, the more that salespeople are provided support commensurate with the workload of a sales activity, the less that the activity will be a source of role conflict and ambiguity. Therefore, we argue that as an activity’s workload increases, both core sales team support and external support will reduce salesperson role stress.

P2: When a sales activity’s workload is high, using dedicated support (i.e., core team or external support) will result in lower role stress than using self-support.

**Customization**

Sales activities also vary in the degree to which the transaction must be customized to a customer’s specific situation. Customization refers to the tailoring of products, services, and procedures to individual customers or sales transactions (Thirumalai and Sinha, 2009). Customization is common in customer contact sales activities, such as when addressing customer needs and objections. However, many non-customer contact activities also require customization, for example, writing legal contracts, entering complex data, and internal presentations.

The less that a sales activity must be customized, the more possible it is to standardize rules and centralize activities (Pertusa-Ortega et al., 2010). Centralization provides economies of scale which increase efficiency and decrease costs (Ghoshal, 1987). Hence, as external support is centralized, external support will have higher efficiency and effectiveness. For example, centralized logistics departments specialize in grouping multiple shipments together and determining the most efficient routes for transporting goods (Barcos et al., 2010). Thus, in situations of low customization, dedicated sales support will prove more efficient at completing sales activities than self-support. However, centralization also creates inflexibility and difficulty responding to change (Ghoshal, 1987). When situations are frequently novel or complex, it may not be advantageous to use a centralized structure if it prevents employees from having the
flexibility to make decisions and act upon them (Pertusa-Ortega et al., 2010). Therefore, we expect that external support, as a centralized structure, will be advantageous when sales activity customization is low but will be disadvantageous compared to decentralized structures when sales activity customization is high.

**P3:** When a sales activity’s customization is low, using external support will result in higher sales activity performance than using internal support (i.e., self-support or core team support), but when a sales activity’s customization is high, using external support will result in lower sales activity performance than using internal support.

If a sales activity requires customization but is controlled by external support, salespeople will be caught between meeting customer needs and adhering to the formalized procedures of the external support. Formalized rules and bureaucratic control have been shown to increase role stress as rules constrain behaviors necessary to handle novel situations (Jaworski et al., 1993). As such, salespeople will feel role stress as they balance the role requirements of the customer and the external support. Thus, as a sales activity’s customization increases, external support will cause salespeople more frustration and stress than core team support or self-support.

**P4:** When a sales activity’s customization is high, using internal support (i.e., self-support or core team support) will result in lower role stress than using external support.

**Complexity**

Another sales activity characteristic is complexity. The sales team literature suggests that non-sales employees assisting salespeople in sales teams may possess a high degree of expertise and skill. For example, Moon and Armstrong (1994, p. 18) write that, “the team can consist of anyone in the firm, such as top executives, engineers, or product planners, whose knowledge of a product, customer, or industry can be used to the seller’s advantage.” Accordingly, we contend that sales activities vary in complexity and the degree to which they require specialized expertise. The more an activity is nuanced and complex, the more expertise that employees must have to complete the activity.
Complexity requires tacit knowledge to make expert judgments (Grant, 1996). Tacit knowledge is difficult to articulate and is typically gained through experience, expertise, and skill (Insch et al., 2008). As the tacit knowledge requirements to complete a sales activity increase, employees will need more training and experience in order to reach a sufficient skill level in the activity. Employees with more specialized skills will be able to make faster and higher quality decisions (Insch et al., 2008; Grant, 1996). Employees must possess sufficient specialization to complete the sales support function. Inadequately performed services could result in a number of negative repercussions, such as losing the sale, negative word-of-mouth, product malfunction, or even legal action.

Salespeople can self-support a complex activity if they are provided training and remain in the job long enough to gain tacit expertise. However, if salespeople have a relatively high turn-over, they will not have enough time to gain tacit expertise. This is consistent with Pinker and Shumsky (2000), who found that specialists outperform generalists when turnover is high and activities are complex. As such, rather than self-support, salespeople can be provided with “resource” support, specialized employees who provide information or expertise to customers and salespeople (Moon and Armstrong, 1994). Experts can be inside or outside of the core selling team (Moon and Armstrong, 1994); thus, managers can train either core team support or external support to work on complex activities. Hence, when complexity is high and salesperson turnover is high, we expect that both core team support and external support will perform complex sales activities better than self-support.

P5: When a sales activity’s complexity is high and salesperson turn-over is high, using dedicated sales support (i.e., core team or external support) will result in higher sales activity performance than using self-support.

Providing salespeople with adequate training so that they can handle their own sales support takes time away from selling and incurs cost; particularly if the skill, expertise, and knowledge requirements of the sales support activity are high. Not only is this likely to distract from selling time, it also may distract from sales training which enhances sales skills. Yet, if salespeople are not provided enough training, they will not
know how to handle the sales activity, causing frustration and increasing the likelihood of mistakes.

However, Üstüner and Godes (2006) argue that resource support must be easily accessible to salespeople; otherwise, salespeople will have to spend valuable time trying to locate the resource. By providing expertise on a dedicated sales team, salespeople will no longer have the burden of locating and coordinating with an appropriate external expert (Üstüner and Godes, 2006). Hence, when a sales activity’s complexity is high, using core team support will reduce salesperson role stress because experts are readily accessible.

P6: When a sales activity’s complexity is high and turn-over is high, 
A) using dedicated sales support (i.e., core team or external support) will result in lower role stress than using self-support, and
B) using core team support will result in lower role stress than using external support.

Prequalification risk

When the cost of processing the transaction is high, firms are often faced with the contradictory goals of increasing sales volume while adhering to quality control (Marinova et al., 2008). Accordingly, sales activities either relate to completing a sale or relate to ensuring customer quality. Salespeople should focus more on customers with higher long-term potential and drop customers that have low long-term potential (Moncrief and Marshall, 2005) and should avoid spending time with unqualified customers (Barber and Tietje, 2008). There are costs and risks associated with selling to customers, which in some cases may be difficult to estimate. First, the sales process itself incurs costs, such as travel expenses, services rendered during the sale, supplies, opportunity costs, and wages. If customers stop a sale without completing the transaction, the selling firm incurs the selling costs without receiving any revenue. Additionally, firms must ensure that customers are willing and able to make ongoing payments; if customers default on payments it hurts firm profitability. If sales transactions are expensive, it is even more important to screen customers for eligibility. Thus, customers must be screened for quality. Accordingly, many sales activities play an
important role in prequalifying customers. For example, Barber and Tietje (2008) note that sales activities may include preparing financial applications.

However, Shapiro and Posner (2006, p. 144) argue that, “psychologically, the qualification process is difficult for a salesperson to accept because he has historically been taught that the ‘lead’ is his most valuable possession.” As the sales activity’s role in prequalifying customers increases, the conflict with other sales goals, such as sales volume should increase. This is particularly salient because salespeople are often focused on shorter-term sales revenue goals (Rouziès et al., 2005). In the short-term, prequalification sales activities can decrease sales revenue because some customers will be dropped. Hence, if salespeople self-support prequalification sales activities, there is a danger that salespeople will shirk on the activities in order to increase performance of other activities. As such, prequalification risk sales activities are often assigned to dedicated sales support. For example, Moon and Armstrong (1994) explain that the “approver” role has the authority to disallow sales to certain customers or make suggestions for improvement. Similarly, in Sumrall’s (1992, p. 19) taxonomy, the author notes that, “the sales assistant and sales administrator jobs seem designed to hold down selling and administrative costs.”

Yet if salespeople can easily contact sales support, then salespeople may pressure support employees for qualification exceptions in order to achieve sales goals. Tellefsen and Eyuboglu (2002) found that salespeople and internal support personnel often are in conflict because of differing goals; salespeople focused on external issues while support personnel focused on internal issues. Manifest conflict is frequently traced to incongruent goals, rewards or structures (Menon et al., 1997). Thus, there will be more manifest conflict between salespeople and dedicated sales support handling risky prequalification sales activities. When there is conflict between salespeople and internal support personnel, salespeople may attempt to use influencing tactics, such as upward delegation, coercive pressure or building friendships in order to reach a favorable outcome (Tellefsen and Eyuboglu, 2002). With core team support, salespeople are in close contact with support staff and can directly use influencing tactics to persuade support staff to qualify marginal customers. If support staff adheres to prequalification guidelines, influencing tactics could escalate cross-functional conflict (e.g., Menon et al.,
1997); yet, if support staff capitulates then customers will not be adequately vetted. Therefore, if prequalification plays an important role in sales activity performance it will be desirable to separate salespeople from the support function. As external support is physically and bureaucratically separate from salespeople, we expect that external support will be able to perform prequalification for appropriate sales activities better than core team support or self-support.

P7: When a sales activity’s prequalification risk is high,
   A) using dedicated sales support (i.e., core team or external support) will result in higher sales activity performance than using self-support, and
   B) using external support will result in higher sales activity performance than using core team support.

Similarly, separating prequalification sales activities from the sales force will relieve salesperson role stress. As stated above, many of the primary activities of a salesperson conflict with prequalification sales activities. Thus, when prequalification risk is high, salespeople will feel significant role stress if they must balance prequalification sales activities with their other activities. Additionally, we argue that assigning risky prequalification sales activities to core team support result in goal conflict within the sales team, which will lead to more coercive cross-functional communications (Fisher et al., 1997). Thus, if the core team supports risky prequalification sales activities, there will be more team conflict, which will increase employee role stress rather than reduce it. However, the sales force will have less opportunity or ability to use persuasive tactics on external support, and thus, have lower stress from internal conflicts. Hence, assigning prequalification risk sales activities to external support will lower salesperson role stress.

P8: When a sales activity’s prequalification risk is high,
   A) using dedicated sales support (i.e., core team or external support) will result in lower role stress than using self-support, and
   B) using external support will result in lower role stress than using core team support.
Impact on sales performance

Salesperson performance has alternatively been conceptualized as self-evaluation of selling efforts (e.g., Ingram et al., 1989), objective sales results (e.g., Keillor et al., 2000; Posdakoff and MacKenzie, 1994), and multi-dimensional achievement of selling and non-selling goals (e.g., Chonko et al. 2000; Behrman and Perreault, 1982). As the selling process is comprised of many types of selling and non-selling activities, we argue that sales performance should be conceptualized multi-dimensionally. Behrman and Perreault (1982) explain that sales performance is comprised of seven dimensions, 1) achieving objective sales performance, 2) controlling company expenses, 3) developing customer relations, 4) sharing information with the firm, 5) ongoing technical training, 6) communicating well with customers, and 7) working well with other personnel in the firm. Similarly, Chonko et al. (2000) developed specific measures of objective sales performance (including revenue and cost goals), developing customer relationships, disseminating information within the firm, and personal training and development. Consistent with these definitions, we define sales performance as maximizing sales margins, building customer relationships, maintaining effective intra-firm relationships, and cultivating job-related expertise.

Sales activity performance

As stated above, sales activity performance is comprised of timeliness, quality, and cost effectiveness. If sales activities are performed on-time and of sufficient quality, customers are more likely to feel satisfied with the sales transaction. Customer satisfaction is based upon the customer’s entire experience with the seller, and therefore, the organization must be consistent (Tellefsen and Eyuboglu, 2002). If sales activities are not completed on-time or of sufficient quality, customers are more likely to feel dissatisfied with the sales transaction and may discontinue the sale.

Sales activities may also play an important role in prequalification. Sales activities involved in prequalifying customers are important to the firm because not all customers are equally profitable; salespeople should sell to profitable customers, drop unprofitable customers, and avoid prospects that are unqualified (Barber and Tietje, 2008; Moncrief and Marshall, 2005). Hence, when prequalification sales activities are
performed better, selling costs are lowered which, in turn, increases sales performance. This is consistent with Behrmann and Perreault’s (1982) performance dimensions of controlling company expenses and developing customer relations, as unqualified customers will be unable to form mutually beneficial relationships. Conversely, weak quality control sales activity performance adversely impacts sales performance. Indeed, many experts claim that poor risk assessments, i.e., poor prequalification sales activity performance, was responsible for the 2007 financial meltdowns (Schmude, 2009). Therefore, whether for the sake of advancing the sales process or prequalifying customers, strong sales activity performance will increase sales performance.


Role stress

Role stress has been linked to higher emotional exhaustion (Boles et al., 1997), lower satisfaction with supervisor, pay, coworkers and the job (Karatepe et al., 2006; Bettencourt and Brown, 2003; Boles et al., 2003), lower customer orientation (Flaherty et al., 1999) and higher organizational turn-over (Grant et al., 2001). Prolonged role stress can cause salespeople anxiety and strain, which can result in burnout (Sager and Wilson, 1995). Over extended periods, role stressors can overwhelm salespeople’s ability to cope and thereby undermine job outcomes (Onyemah, 2008).

Interestingly, there is conflicting evidence regarding the effect of role stress on salesperson performance. Many researchers contend that role stress has a negative effect (e.g., MacKenzie et al., 1998; Grant et al., 2001) while others have proposed a curvilinear relationship between role stress and performance (Onyemah, 2008; Singh, 1998). We speculate that the discrepancy may be caused by the definition of sales performance. Both Onyemah (2008) and Singh (1998) proposed a curvilinear relationship between role stress and performance but they used different performance measures and found different results. Onyemah (2008) used an objective sales performance measures and found a curvilinear relationship between job stress and performance. Conversely, Singh (1998) used a broader measure of sales performance that included other dimensions, such as customer relations, planning, knowledge, and found a negative linear relationship between job stress and sales performance.
Hence, it is possible that role stress causes salespeople to prioritize shorter term outcomes, such as objective sales results, over longer term outcomes, such as relationship building and personal development. While shifting salesperson priority to shorter-term outcome will temporarily increase objective sales performance, it will have an overall negative effect on sales performance as we define it, particularly in the long term. Hence, we expect that role stress will have a detrimental impact on sales performance.

P10: Role stress decreases sales performance.

Discussion

In this section, we answer our research questions and then discuss the influence of sales strategy, purchasing situation, and sales conditions. Our first research question is “when is it appropriate to provide dedicated support for a specific sales activity?” The answer is that salespeople should handle sales activities which are light to moderate in workload, relatively easy to learn—particularly when turn-over is high—and not related to prequalifying risky customers. Our model highlights the importance of allocating risky prequalification sales activities to sales support. Assigning these activities to salespeople could lead to higher sales revenue yet decrease sales performance. Furthermore, while it may seem intuitive to provide support for activities that have a high workload or are complex, salespeople frequently complain that “a large portion of their productive time is wasted in non-selling tasks instead of pursuing sales opportunities that can help them meet their performance goals,” (Jaramillo et al., 2006, p. 25). As sales guru’s often advise salespeople to become experts in every aspect of their job (e.g., Greer, 2008), it is understandable that sales managers may feel reluctant to provide sales support. Accordingly, our model can help managers to determine the right conditions in which to offer support.

The second question is, “when dedicated support is appropriate, why assign sales activities to external departments if it is more difficult for salespeople?” This answer depends largely on customization and prequalification risk. Core team support is best when sales activities need to be customized yet have either a high workload or high learning-curve. However, core team support will not be as beneficial when prequalification risk is high because salespeople could potentially influence the
prequalification process. For risky prequalification sales activities, or for sales activities which have high workload and low customization, external support is most appropriate. As not all activities have the same characteristics, it may be desirable to use different types of support for different activities. For example, coordination and technical support might be handled by the core team, while financing might be allocated to an external department.

It is important to point out that characteristics of each sales activity dimension will vary not only by industry but also by sales strategy, purchasing situation, and selling conditions. For sales strategy, firms can be transaction-oriented, in which they focus on maximizing the profitability of each discrete transaction, or relationship-oriented, in which they focus on building mutually beneficial partnerships in order to maximize long-term profitability (Weitz and Bradford, 1999). For example, in order to meet the specific needs of customers, firms with a relational strategy will need to customize many sales activities more than firms with a transactional strategy. However, firms with a transactional strategy will sell to greater numbers of different customers, increasing the workload of sales activities related to processing new customers. Similarly, as strong relationships increase the harm caused by cheating (Mishra et al., 1998), firms with a relational strategy will have more prequalification risk than firms with transactional strategies. Hence, the dimensions of sales activities will often depend on sales strategy. As Geiger and Finch (2011) found that firms often pursue transactional strategies towards smaller customers and relational strategies towards larger customers, it is possible that a sales activity might have different characteristics even within the same firm. Accordingly, we recommend that firms using both strategies consider a different sales support structure for relational and transactional customers.

Similarly, purchasing situation will likely impact sales activities as well. We posit that many sales activities, such as technical support and internal coordination, have very different dimensions for a major capital equipment purchase than for a supply reorder. As such, the appropriate sales support would be different. For example, the medical/dental supply firm mentioned earlier sells both capital equipment and basic supplies to dentist offices. As the sales activity dimensions of each purchase type are different, they use separate channels of distribution. For medical equipment sales, they
use a core team consisting of a salesperson, several technicians, and a coordinator, as well as an external financing department when credit/leasing options are needed. For medical supply reorders, they use several external departments consisting of an automated ordering system and a centralized logistics department. The salesperson is only required for answering questions. Accordingly, it may also be beneficial to consider a different sales support structure for each purchasing situation.

Finally, sales activity dimensions change in response to environmental conditions. For example, after the 2007 financial crisis, banks tightened lending standards to customers and business (De Haas and Van Horen, 2010). As credit became more difficult to obtain many customers who were previously qualified could no longer receive credit; hence, the prequalification risk for a variety of sales activities relating to new customer development would also increase. Similarly, the release of a new technology would likely alter the workload and complexity of technological support.

Managerial Guidelines

Based on our framework and discussion, it is possible to develop a decision model for assigning sales activities to sales support (shown in Figure 2). These normative guidelines are meant to assist managers in deciding how to structure sales support for any given sales activity with the ultimate aim of increasing overall sales performance. We discuss five questions managers should answer when deciding whether to allocate a sales activity to salespeople, the core sales team, or an external department.

Q1: Does the sales activity involve qualifying risky customers?

As discussed above, prequalification of customers is important when the cost of selling to poorly qualified customers is high. If the risk of selling to poorly qualified customers is low, then prequalification activities can be left to salespeople or the core selling team. However, the stricter the prequalification process, the more role stress
salespeople will feel and the more likely they will shirk on prequalification activities in order to increase performance on other sales activities. Hence, we recommend that when prequalification is important, the final decision for said activity should be handled by a department outside of the sales force. Therefore, if the answer is “yes,” the risk of selling to poorly qualified customers is high, managers should use an external support structure for prequalification, where the “approver” role is outsourced to an external department. If the answer is “no,” continue to Q2.

Q2: Can salespeople handle the workload of the sales activity comfortably?

This question assesses whether it is even plausible to have a single salesperson responsible for the activity. Sales managers should assess the workload of the sales activity and compare it with the working hours of salespeople. If a single person cannot handle the workload comfortably, then some sort of team structure must be implemented. Furthermore, managers must consider what they believe is a reasonable pipeline of customers for salespeople. If a single transaction takes most of the salesperson’s working hours, salespeople will have very little time to work on more than one transaction at a time or prospect for more customers. If salespeople can handle the workload of a sales activity continue to Q3; otherwise skip to Q5.

Q3: Does it require considerable expertise?

Even if salespeople can handle the workload of an activity comfortably, it may still be desirable to provide salespeople assistance if there are a variety of complex skills involved. Similar to workload, managers should assess the amount of time and effort it will take for a salesperson to become competent on the sales activity. The longer it takes to learn the sales activity, the higher the costs in terms of wages, lost selling time, and training. If the activity requires considerable expertise, continue to Q4. If not, we recommend self-support, as the costs of using specialized support will be greater than the benefits of specialized support.

Q4: Is turn-over high?
A key question for determining the value of training salespeople on a sales activity is whether the turn-over of salespeople is high or low. In addition to training costs, many complex sales activities require time on the job to accumulate skills and expertise. If salespeople have high turnover, they may not have enough time to become competent at complex sales activities. In that case, it is better to assign those activities to specialists with lower turn-over. Hence, if turn-over is high, continue to Q5. Conversely, if turn-over is low, it may be worthwhile to train salespeople on the activity, to avoid bottlenecks in the selling process (Pinker and Shumsky, 2000). Therefore, we recommend self-support.

Q5: Is customization high?

If the workload is high or complexity and turnover are high, then managers should provide dedicated sales support. The choice between providing support as part of the cross-functional selling team and an external departments depends on the degree of customization required for each sales activity. As explained before, external support has the advantage of economies of scale but is less able to customize offerings, while core team support has fewer economies of scale but is far more agile. Therefore, if customization is high, then the sales support should be integrated into the core selling team, in order to ensure customer needs are satisfied. If customization is low, then sales support should be provided externally, in order to maximize the efficiency of providing the support.

Future research

Salesperson-sales support conflict

It has been noted that goals must be aligned between departments and teams in order to maximize performance (Deeter-Schmelz and Kennedy, 2003). However, this is not always the case for sales support. When sales support handles risky prequalification sales activities and salespeople handle sales revenue activities, there will be inherent goal conflict between these two functions. This allows the firm to pursue both cost and quality goals simultaneously. As such, it would be interesting to study the inherent conflict in selling centers where prequalification risk is high.
Based on the preceding argument, we would argue that conflicting goals are sometimes desirable. While it may be beneficial to create task-related conflict through complementary (rather than congruent) goals, the challenge is to minimize interpersonal conflict (which is almost never beneficial to any part of an organization) (Jehn, 1997). In this case, we suspect that physical and bureaucratic separation will be better than integration. However, there may be other mechanisms, such as reward structure or information systems, which can also minimize interpersonal conflict (see Eisenhardt, 1985).

Future research should strive to identify, specify, and test the relationship between salespeople focused on revenue sales activities and sales support focused on risky prequalification sales activities. For example, what are the factors that managers must consider in order to prevent inappropriate influence and how might they differ depending on whether the sales support is provided by a person versus an automated system? Do expert sales support personnel manage conflict better and lead to better outcomes than unskilled sale support?

**Sales support effect on customer satisfaction**

Customers judge sales transactions based upon their total experience. In many sales contexts, sales support personnel have face-to-face interactions with customers and the quality of their work is directly observable by customers. Thus, the interaction between the sales support employee and the customer will likely influence customer satisfaction. Similarly, many firms refer customers to an automated system for technical assistance. We contend that automated systems are a form of external centralized support developed by an information technology department. They should be acceptable for providing standardized information and processing standardized requests. However, based upon our framework, external support should not be used for customized activities. Thus, as automation is external support, it should not be used to provide customized assistance. Furthermore, even when sales support takes place “behind the scenes,” sales support quality can still indirectly impact customer satisfaction through the quality of the salesperson’s work. Therefore, future research should examine the impact of sales support on customer satisfaction and salesperson performance.
References


Figure 1: Conceptual Model

Salesperson Role Stress
- Conflict
- Ambiguity

Sales activity dimensions
- Workload
- Customization
- Complexity
- Prequalification

Sales support structure
- Self-support
- Core team support
- External support

Sales activity Performance
- Timeliness
- Quality
- Cost

Salesperson Role Stress
- Conflict
- Ambiguity

Sales Performance
Figure 2: Decision tree for assigning sales activities

1. Does it involve qualifying risky customers?
   - Yes: Does it require considerable expertise?
     - No: Can salespeople handle the workload of the sales activity comfortably?
       - Yes: Is customization high?
         - No: External support
         - Yes: Core team support
     - Yes: Can salespeople handle the workload of the sales activity comfortably?
       - Yes: Is customization high?
         - No: Core team support
         - Yes: External support
2. Can salespeople handle the workload of the sales activity comfortably?
   - Yes: Is customization high?
     - No: Core team support
     - Yes: External support
   - No: No: Self-support

Self-support

Core team support

External support