

Perhaps It's Time to Rethink the Way We Think About Sales Jobs

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Abstract

This paper suggests a need to take a new look at an old way of classifying sales jobs. Wotruba's (1991) taxonomy is in line with suggestions by Industrial Psychologists that jobs are usefully classified according to their level of complexity.

Introduction

A great deal of effort has been expended by salespeople, their managers, and academics with the goal of understanding the performances of individual salespeople and differences in performance between them (Szymanski, 1988). Two meta-analyses (Churchill, Ford, Hartley, & Walker, 1985; Ford, Walker, Churchill, & Hartley, 1987) have sought to summarize the results of these efforts. Unfortunately, the results of each of the meta-analyses indicated no one factor consistently explained a large amount of the variability between the performances of salespeople.

This paper suggests that we should, or do, know more about predicting salesperson performance than the meta-analyses indicate. It also argues that sales jobs should be classified according to the recommendations of industrial psychologists, by their level of complexity. Additionally and perhaps most importantly, it suggests a taxonomy originally proposed by Wotruba in 1991 that has been largely ignored, should receive more attention by researchers. This is because Wotruba (1991) classified sales jobs by their level of complexity, as suggested by industrial psychologists, rather than customer or product type as has most often been done by marketing academics. According to the Social Science Citation Index, Wotruba (1991) was cited once between 1992 and April 2000, this citation was Wotruba 1996.

Meta-Analyses Investigating Salesperson Performance

Two related conclusions drawn by the authors from the meta-analyses are: (1) across studies, no factor adequately accounts for variations in selling effectiveness; and (2) what is done with, and to, salespeople is probably more important than which people are selected to become salespeople. This second conclusion is counter-intuitive in that if it were correct, and we assume that firms do not discriminate in the training and opportunities they provide to individual salespeople, we should see smaller differences in performance between salespeople working for any single company. An additional problem with this conclusion is that it is not consistent with a great deal of literature in industrial psychology or the implications of research into adaptive selling and cognitive scripting as will be discussed.

Perhaps the most important conclusion reached by the authors is that the determinants of performance may well be job specific. In fact, the authors point out that contrary to the disappointing results of the meta-analyses, in many individual sales studies individual factors were good predictors of performance. They extend from this conclusion that before differences in performance can be explained, and more useful advice regarding selection of salespeople can be given, researchers must gain understanding of how sales jobs, and requirements for success in them, differ from one another. The need to understand sales jobs better is still with us, (see pp. 346-350 in Churchill, Ford, Walker, Johnston, and Tanner, 2000).

Adaptive Selling and Cognitive Scripting

In the sales literature, an important stream of research has investigated the relationship between adaptive selling and performance (e.g., Leong, Busch, & John, 1989; SuJan, 1986; SuJan et al., 1994; Sujan, Weitz, & Sujan, 1988; Weitz, 1978, 1984; Weitz, Sujan, & SuJan, 1986). Adaptive selling is defined as the altering of sales behaviors during a customer interaction or across customer interactions based on perceived information about the nature of the selling situation (Weitz et al., 1986, p. 175). The real advantage of personal selling over other forms of promotion is that personal selling allows the content and style of the interaction to be adjusted to fit the needs and wants of the prospect to a much greater extent and in a more timely manner than any other form of promotion. As would be expected, the practice of adaptive selling, or "Working Smart," has been found to have a positive effect on selling performance (Leong et al., 1989; SuJan & Weitz, 1986; Sujan et al., 1994).

Two simple ideas drive this research stream. First, there are differences in selling situations and in the determinants of success and failure in them. Second, salespeople who are appropriately adaptive to each individual situation are more likely to be successful in any one situation than their less appropriately adaptive colleagues.

Adaptive selling will not always be beneficial. When customers-their needs, resources, and situations-are similar to one another, the costs of adaptation may well exceed the benefits. However, Weitz (1986) argues the benefits of adaptive selling will increase relative to its costs as: (1) the variety of customer needs and types increases, (2) the importance of the typical buying situation increases, (3) resources provided by the company to the salesperson increase, and (4) the salesperson's adaptive abilities and skills increase. In this list of determinants of the benefits of adaptive selling, the first three are related to characteristics of the sales situation and point to increasing benefits as situation complexity increases. The fourth is related to characteristics of the salesperson and suggests increasing benefits from adaptive selling as ability to deal with selling situation complexity increases.

Classifying Sales Jobs

As the authors of the meta-analyses (Churchill et al., 1985; Ford et al., 1987; Churchill et al., 2000) suggest, a better understanding of sales jobs and differences in their requirements is needed. Industrial Psychologists, Gottfredson (1986) and Hunter (1980, 1983), point out that the best first step toward understanding the requirements of success in different jobs is to classify them according to their intellectual difficulty. In each of the sales-related meta-analyses, sales jobs were classified by customer type as either institutional, individual, or unknown, and by product type as one of consumer goods, industrial goods, services, or unknown (Churchill et al., 1985; Ford et al., 1987). Although there is a certain logic for these classes, they do not address the crucial job dimension of complexity of intellectual demands. It seems that the job classification schema used in the meta-analyses (Churchill et al., 1985; Ford et al., 1987) may have been chosen on the basis of its familiarity and acceptability to marketing academics rather than its usefulness for investigating the determinants of salesperson performance. The authors seem to allude to this possibility at the conclusion of each article when they suggest: (1) the determinants of sales performance may be job specific, and (2) better understanding of the ways sales jobs differ from one another is needed in order to better explain performance differences and provide more useful selection guidelines. Because the classification schemata used in the meta-analyses (Churchill et al., 1985; Ford et al., 1987) does not address mental complexity it is necessary to find another classification schemata.

Several writers have suggested classification schemes to assist in the categorization and understanding of sales jobs (e.g., McMurray, 1961; Moncrief, 1986; Newton, 1973; Wotruba, 1991). Wotruba's (1991) taxonomy addresses the complexity of the job and thus appears to be the most promising. It is based on the idea that sales jobs evolve to fit the competitive and market environments in which they exist. Wotruba describes sales jobs as encompassing a wide range of duties, behaviors, and challenges. He suggests a taxonomy for sales job evolution that includes five evolutionary stages. The five stages and Wotruba's brief description of each, along with examples are shown in Table One.

According to Wotruba, sales jobs can be identified in any stage of the taxonomy, and later stages do not discard characteristics of the prior ones but include them along with new characteristics. Therefore, each stage is more complex than its predecessor. The job of the salesperson working in the procreator stage must be more complex than those of salespeople working in stages preceding it in the taxonomy because it includes the requirements of them and adds new ones. The least complex sales job is that of the provider, where the job of selling is an almost pure distribution facilitation role. As sales jobs become more complex, demands on salesperson talent and offering adaptability increase. At the same time, customers become fewer in number as their needs become more specific.

Wotruba's taxonomy seems to capture both the increasing complexity of the sales job and the increasing demands on the salesperson to deal with complexity as it progresses from provider to procreator. It is also in agreement with Weitz's (1986) suggestion regarding the four determinants of the beneficiality of adaptive selling; that as sales job complexity increases, the necessity and value of adaptability increases. Wotruba's taxonomy is further supported by the findings of Hunter (1983) and Gottfredson (1986) that job complexity is a valid and frequently used way to classify jobs.

Conclusions and Implications

Perhaps it is time to rethink the way we think about sales jobs. The results of two meta-analyses (Churchill et al., 1985 and Ford et al., 1987) suggest we don't know much about predicting salesperson performance. However, as mentioned in the meta-analyses, in individual studies it is not uncommon that good predictors of performance are identified. It seems possible that familiar and traditional ways of classifying sales jobs prevent us from seeing what another schema would clearly reveal because they do not address differing levels cognitive complexity likely to be present in different types of selling jobs.

Wotruba's (1991) taxonomy is built on the idea that sales jobs have different requirements and that some are more complex than others. If this idea is accepted it must also be accepted that predictors of performance will also be different in different categories. Thus, it should not be surprising that meta-analyses combining the categories and not addressing complexity resulted in inconclusive findings. It is suggested that research aimed at understanding and predicting salesperson performance ought to build on and use Wotruba's (1991) taxonomy in lieu of, or in addition to, more traditional classification schema.

Opportunities for research in the use of Wotruba's taxonomy are plentiful. First, to make it more useful there is a need to develop instruments for classifying sales jobs within it. Second, previous research that used traditional ways of classifying sales jobs can be reexamined using it. For example, it is quite possible a meta-analysis using it would produce results different from the two earlier ones. Third, new studies aimed at improving ability to predict salesperson performance could seek to identify predictors that are valid in multiple classes of sales jobs and those that are category specific.

Table One. A Taxonomy of Sales Jobs Based on Wotruba (1991)

Stage of Job Evolution	Typical Selling Tasks	Examples
Provider	Accepting orders from available offering. Conveying order to buyer	Route Sales. Retail Sales.
Persuader	Convincing any and all members to buy the available offering	Tele-mktg. for photography studio. New car sales.
Prospector	Seeking selected buyers perceived to have need for offering as well as resources and authority to buy.	Office supplies to small businesses.
Problem-Solver	Obtaining participation of buyers in identifying their problems that can be translated into needs that can be satisfied from the suppliers existing offering.	Integrated tele-communication systems.
Procreator	Defining buyer problems/needs and solutions through active buyer-seller collaboration. Creation of a unique marketing offering tailored specifically to provide the desired outcome.	Custom design of manufacturing facility and equipment.

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