

The effects of sales supervisor relationships on work meaning: The case of Canadian and Chinese salespersons

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ABSTRACT

Although the meaning of work—an individual's understanding of the purpose and significance of his or her work—is often discussed, the issue of how to enrich the meaning of work for salespeople remains poorly understood. This study examines the role of sales manager–salesperson relationships in the development of work meaning in a cross-cultural context. To better understand how work meaning might differ in Eastern (collectivist) and Western (individualist) cultures, data were gathered from salespersons in the Chinese and Canadian telecommunications industries. Findings suggest that the development of work meaning among Canadian salespeople is ascribed to the perceptions of customer orientation and self-determination. Conversely, in China, a quality relationship with one's sales supervisor is a direct factor in the development of work meaning. Managers of global sales forces should carefully consider the cultural differences of their salespersons and how a close personal relationship can impact the understanding of the purpose and significance of work for their sales team. After discussing the findings, managerial implications and suggestions for future research are offered.

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With the growth of globalization, increased competition, and the challenge of understanding the complex needs of clients, today's selling environment has changed significantly (Jones et al., 2005; Sheth & Sharma, 2008; Tanner, Fournier, Wise, Hollet, & Poujol, 2008; Trailer & Dickie, 2006). Salespeople now face rapidly evolving buyer needs and expectations (Atkinson & Koprowski, 2006; Blocker & Flint, 2007) and the challenge of successfully growing customer relationships while meeting company goals (Bettencourt & Brown, 2003; Homburg, Wieseke, & Bornemann, 2009). Given the demanding nature of these responsibilities, salespeople can experience dissatisfaction in their sales role. If sales professionals become dissatisfied with their job and experience excessive stress, their level of service to the customer may not meet buyer expectations that produce long-term, profitable customer relationships.

One important driver that can help sales people buffer job stress and increase productivity is their belief in work meaning. Work meaning refers to an individual's understanding of the purpose and significance of their work (Wrzensniewski & Dutton, 2001). Research suggests that employees are more likely to expend personal time for extra-duties and accept a challenging work environment when they believe their work is meaningful and worthy (Bunderson & Thompson, 2009). Increased work meaning can improve individual motiva-

tion and performance (Guion & Landy, 1972), and increase work effectiveness, an important concern for sales practitioners and researchers in today's competitive selling arena.

By virtue of the importance to salespeople and the selling organization, sales managers need to identify ways to heighten subordinates' perceptions of work meaning. However, little insight on this topic is found in the extant literature. The issue becomes even more complex as global sales efforts require sales supervisors to lead and support a culturally diverse sales team. In response to this research void, this study addresses the following question: *How can a sales supervisor enrich work meaning of salespeople in local and overseas markets?*

The purpose of this study is to propose and test a model that hypothesizes that by developing of a quality working relationship, a sales supervisor can enrich the meaning of their sales team's work by nurturing perceptions of customer orientation in the selling organization and enhancing self-determination (see Fig. 1). Additionally, we compare the influence of a personal sales supervisor–salesperson relationship in Eastern and Western cultural sales environments.

By formulating and testing our model, we contribute to the literature in two ways. First, we undertake a pioneering effort to explore work meaning in a sales context, a construct related to sales force motivation and performance (Roberson, 1990). Second, in response to the call for more cross-national sales management studies (e.g., Albaum & Peterson, 1984), we investigate how salespeople from different cultures experience work meaning. This is a valuable

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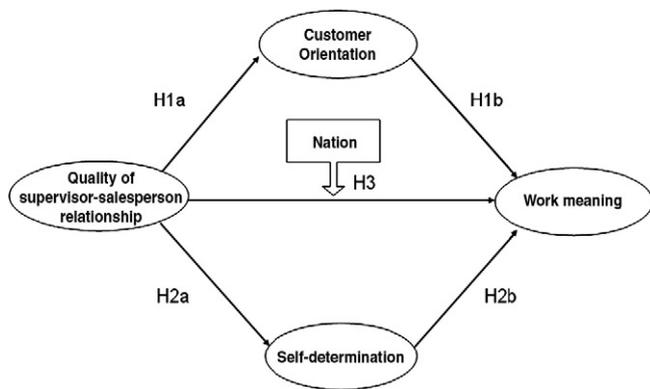


Fig. 1. Summary of hypotheses.

contribution to the sales literature because work outcomes, as well as work meaning perceptions, can vary across cultures (e.g., Comer & Dubinsky, 1985).

1. Conceptual background

1.1. Work meaning

Work is a universal, basic necessity for individuals in all societies (Kuchinke, 2009). Yet, the meaning of work varies based upon individual idiosyncratic interpretation and evaluation of the purpose of the task and its relevance to self and important others, such as co-workers, customers, supervisors, or organizations (Wrzesniewski, Dutton, & Debebe, 2003). When an employee performs work solely for economic reward, it is unlikely to inspire a sense of significance or transcendent meaning to him/her (Bunderson & Thompson, 2009). This is because monetary incentives are generally regarded to be of lower order in the human needs hierarchy (Maslow, 1954). The meaning of work should be grounded in the satisfaction of higher order needs, such as social needs or self-actualization. Selling and post-sales service tasks are not merely a means to earn income for salespersons, but they also provide an opportunity to experience a sense of accomplishment and contribution to their department, buyers, and society. Work also serves as a means to earn respect and to demonstrate one's self value to both supervisors and peers (Fineman, 1983).

As boundary spanners, salespeople must constantly perform tasks that meet the needs of their buyers and their affiliated organizations (Singh, 1998). These extra-duties can be ambiguous to salespersons since they cannot know how highly these tasks are valued by their organization or how significant they are to their career success. Their sales supervisor, who designs their jobs and sets goals, can help affirm or disconfirm the purpose and significance of these non-prescribed work tasks. We theorize that quality interactions and trust between a salesperson and his/her sales supervisor enrich the work meaning of the salesperson via two approaches.

1.2. Two approaches to enrich the work meaning of salespeople

Sales supervisors play an influential role in affecting the attitudes and behaviors of their subordinate salespeople in two ways (e.g., Stock & Hoyer, 2002). First, a supervisor may directly define the meaning of a sales job when he or she creates the position and records the job specifications. For the typical salesperson, the major roles and duties assigned by management are to serve and sell to customers. Hence, the most apparent work meaning stems from the value of serving customers. Salespeople may also have their own views on what sales activities are meaningful to their customers. The level of management control therefore, implies there is room for salespeople

to craft the meanings of their own work. The amount of self-determination given to salespeople becomes a second way for supervisors to influence the formation of the salespeople's work meaning.

2. Hypothesis development

In the theoretical model shown in Fig. 1, customer orientation and self-determination are posited as two significant management intervention approaches regarding the formation of salesperson work meaning.

2.1. The roles of supervisor in promoting customer orientation and work meaning

Customer orientation refers to a continuous, proactive disposition toward meeting customer exigencies and a focus on total customer satisfaction (Han, Kim, & Srivastava, 1998). Since achieving service excellence (Grewal & Sharma, 1991) and implementing a customer relationship management (CRM) strategy are both predicated on the level of customer orientation salespeople perform in their daily work (Periatt, LeMay, & Chakrabarty, 2004), sales organizations now pay more attention to the practice of "customer orientation" among salespeople to ensure long-term customer satisfaction (Saxe & Weitz, 1982). The favorable results of implementing customer-oriented selling are numerous, including sales force effectiveness (Baldauf & Cravens, 1999), improved customer-salesperson relationships (Williams & Attaway, 1996), and buyer retention (Tanner, Honeycutt, & Erffmeyer, 2009). Customer-oriented selling is widely advocated by sales supervisors to favorably enhance the service provided by salespeople and achieve quality goals (Flaherty, Dahlstrom, & Skinner, 1999).

As discussed earlier, the meaning of work is to a large extent shaped by a salesperson's supervisor. Prior leader-member relationship research suggests that the influence of the supervisor, including the development of customer orientation and work meaning of salespeople, is particularly effective when the dyad engages in a high quality relationship (e.g., O'Hara, Boles, & Johnston, 1991; Stock & Hoyer, 2002). In this study, a quality supervisor-supervisee relationship is characterized by a high degree of mutual concern, trust, and obligation (DelVecchio, 1998; Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). We posit that a sales supervisor can influence the adoption of customer orientation by the salesperson, which in turn, enriches the meaning of their work. This premise is based upon three reasons.

First, sales supervisors often serve a crucial role in coaching their subordinates through frequent communications and social exchanges (Liao & Subramony, 2008). In close working relationships, a supervisor provides numerous verbal and non-verbal cues of proper work attitudes to his/her salesperson in daily work and non-work activities in addition to formal communications, at sales meetings and training sessions. Wrzesniewski et al. (2003) believe that these interpersonal cues are important for salespeople in their organizational socialization process and formation of work meaning. With the interpretation of interpersonal cues, salespeople learn the values and attitudes of their supervisor toward different routine and non-routine customer-oriented service activities. The superior position of supervisors in the organization, combined with interactions with their supervisees, enables sales managers to become a role model of customer orientation to salespeople (Kennedy, Goolsby, & Arnold, 2003; Lockwood & Kunda, 1997; Wieseke, Ullrich, Christ, & Van Dick, 2007). In accord with his/her supervisor, the salesperson will learn and adopt customer-oriented selling.

Second, based upon the principle of reciprocity, previous social exchange theory research suggests that a high quality supervisor-supervisee relationship enhances the adoption of customer orientation among salespeople (e.g., Dabos & Rousseau, 2004; Setton,

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