



How does sales force automation influence relationship quality and performance? The mediating roles of learning and selling behaviors

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ABSTRACT

Sales force automation (SFA) technologies are increasingly used to support customer relationship management strategies. However, previous studies have reported mixed results about the performances of SFA technologies. Therefore, this study seeks to further examine the impact of SFA usage on both customer relationship quality and sales performance. Additionally, the mediating roles of learning and adaptive selling behaviors on the outcomes of SFA usage are investigated. The results highlight the mediating role of salesperson learning and adaptive selling behaviors in the SFA usage and sales performance relationship. Especially noteworthy is the impact of learning through adaptive selling on those outcome variables. Implications for SFA research and practice that may further improve our understanding of this increasingly relevant topic are also offered.

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Because of today's intensive competitive environment, companies are taking new avenues to make inroads into or enhance their market position. One such effort involves acquiring customer information that enables development and implementation of more efficient and effective customer-focused strategies and detailed promotional programs (Hansotia, 2002; Kim & Kim, 2009; King & Burgess, 2008). Germane information can help company sales personnel build mutually beneficial, long-term customer relationships—the focus of many contemporary salespeople (Anderson, Dubinsky, & Mehta, 2007; Weitz & Bradford, 1999). Accordingly, numerous companies have become attracted to the enhanced communication and information access represented by customer relationship management (CRM) through the use of sales force automation (SFA) technologies (e.g., Cho & Chang, 2008; Hair, Anderson, Mehta, & Babin, 2009; Widmier, Jackson, & McCabe, 2002).

Proponents of SFA have long advocated its potential for increased productivity (e.g., Hair et al., 2009; Moriarty & Swartz, 1989; Wedell & Hempeck, 1987). Indeed, early reports almost universally heralded the enhanced efficiency and rapid return on investment resulting from the implementation of SFA systems (Colombo, 1993; McLachlan, 1992; Swenson & Parrella, 1992). More recent findings, however, suggest that

a startling percentage—upwards of 70%—of SFA projects have been unsuccessful (e.g., Ericson, 2002; Rivers & Dart, 1999).

Several notable studies have sought to explain these mixed results by positioning the problem as chiefly one of failed or incomplete adoption of the technology by the sales force. Researchers of these empirical efforts essentially attribute these discrepant outcomes to variables that influence adoption success. For instance, Jones, Sundaram, and Chin (2002) examined factors that influence salespeople's intention to adopt SFA tools versus their actual usage of those tools (SFA infusion). The findings revealed that there are different factors affecting intention to use and actual usage. Rivers and Dart (1999) investigated variables that have an impact on the extent of SFA acquisition (in dollars and perceived technological sophistication of SFA equipment) and achieved SFA benefits (perceived change in salesperson efficiency and perceived average payback period for the SFA investment). That work identified a number of correlates related to company acquisition of sales force technology, but relatively few of the study's variables were related to whether firms realize any benefits from SFA investments. Keillor, Bashaw, and Pettijohn (1997) studied salesperson attitudes toward the use of technology applications and relationships between these attitudes and salespeople's experience and perceived productivity. They observed that technology can contribute to increased salesperson productivity and may be a way through which less experienced sales personnel can augment their productivity faster.

Despite the value that ascertaining variables which influence successful SFA adoption provides, there may well be alternate reasons

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for SFA success and failures. In fact, we argue that perhaps focusing on that answer is too simplistic. We assert that the discordant results stem from the foci of extant empirical work.

First, as some studies already suggest, the mixed results may be a function of the SFA construct itself and variables related to it. Indeed, Jones et al. (2002) aver that the “productivity paradox” (Venkatesh & Davis, 2000, p.186) may stem from low usage of the system, as opposed to adoption, per se. That is, a firm may have implemented (or “adopted”) SFA, but its salespeople might be utilizing it at a low level. This supposition is consistent with some previous SFA research (e.g., Keillor et al., 1997; Rivers & Dart, 1999). Furthermore, Parthasarathy and Sohi (1997) propose that SFA adoption occurs at two levels—organizational and salesperson.

Another possible rationale for the inconsistent findings regarding SFA success or failure pertains to the measure of SFA “success” that researchers typically have employed. A recent stream of research has focused on the importance of determinants of successful technology adoption or extent of usage of SFA. For instance, after interviewing executives in three firms, Bush, Moore, and Rocco (2005) developed a model that suggests SFA success/failure rests on three major variables: degree of requisite process change, salesperson buy-in, and perceptions of technology enablement. Schillewaert, Ahearne, Frambach, and Moenaert (2005) explored factors that influence technology use. They found that usage depends on salespeople’s perceptions about the ability of technology to augment their performance, their personal innovativeness, and company efforts vis-à-vis user training. Testing a model of CRM technology usage, Avlontinis and Panagopoulos (2005) discerned that salesperson usage is a function of perceived usefulness and ease of use of the technology, accuracy of expectations vis-à-vis system usage, salesperson technological innovativeness, and manager support and encouragement. Rangarajan, Jones, and Chin (2005) determined that SFA usage is related to salespeople’s efforts in placing technology into their daily activities, as well as the perceived usefulness of the technology. And Buehrer, Senecal, and Pullins (2005) investigated why sales personnel utilize SFA, perceived obstacles to SFA usage, and requisite management efforts to augment SFA usage. The major reason for salespeople’s use of technology was enhanced performance, little or no and technical support was the key impediment to usage, and training was the most effective way in which to enhance usage of SFA. Witness that the criterion for SFA success in the foregoing work is usage. Adoption does not imply that SFA efforts have been successful. Sales personnel may be utilizing management-mandated SFA tools but may be doing so in a tempered fashion (e.g., Keillor et al., 1997; Rivers & Dart, 1999). For instance, if salespeople feel that the SFA tool is not easy to use or provides little value, they are not likely to embrace the technology (Avlontinis & Panagopoulos, 2005; Jones et al., 2002; Robinson, Marshall, & Stamps, 2005).

SFA technology is intended to enhance salesperson efficiency and effectiveness (Anderson et al., 2007; Hair et al., 2009) and ultimately firm performance (Kim & Kim, 2009). Yet, whether this intention aligns with reality generally remains an empirical question, as little scholarly work has investigated the SFA usage/salesperson performance link. Ahearne, Jelinek, and Rapp (2005) examined the moderating impact of user training and support on the association between use of SFA and salesperson percent of quota and daily number of calls (two measures of performance). Study results indicated that the use of SFA enhances those two performance variables only when sufficient user support and training are provided. Ahearne, Srinivasan, and Weinstein (2004) determined that the relationship between SFA usage and salesperson performance (percent of quota achieved) is curvilinear. Avlontinis and Panagopoulos (2005), though, found no association between SFA usage and salesperson performance. Notwithstanding these three studies, further examination of the SFA usage/salesperson relationship appears warranted, which is consistent with Avlontinis and Panagopoulos (2005) call for additional research in the area.

Also, previous studies essentially have disregarded the relationship between SFA usage and customer relationship quality, another potential measure of SFA success. Interestingly, Yim, Anderson, and Swaminathan (2005) ascertained that incorporating CRM technology had no impact on three performance metrics that are associated with customer relationship quality—customer satisfaction, customer retention, or sales volume. An improved quality of the salesperson–customer relationship may be one of the more important outcomes of SFA usage (Jayachandran, Sharma, Kaufman, & Raman, 2005). This shortcoming in prior empirical work is especially meaningful in today’s marketplace, given the increasing focus placed on retention, customer equity, and customer lifetime value (Rust, Zeithaml, & Lemon, 2004). Enhanced understanding of relationship quality in the context of SFA deployment should allow for improved effective management of an SFA system. Thus, there remains a need for research to examine the impact of SFA usage on relationship quality.

To address the foregoing limitations of extant research, we conducted a study to examine the influence of SFA on salesperson performance and on customer relationship quality. We did not explore, however, the direct linkages between SFA and these two outcome variables. Rather, we considered the mediating roles of market learning behavior and adaptive selling behavior on the two relationships. Based on extant work (subsequently discussed), SFA’s impact on salesperson performance and relationship quality is likely to be mediated by salesperson learning and adaptive selling. Moreover, we investigated the effect of salesperson experience on salesperson SFA usage, adaptive selling behavior, and market learning behavior. Although scholars have studied these associations to some extent (see subsequent discussion), they have tended to employ unidimensional measures to assess experience. Using one measure may have concealed or decreased potential relationships between experience and SFA usage, adaptive selling behavior, and market learning behavior. To overcome this weakness, we utilized three alternate objective measures of experience. The model of the study is presented in Fig. 1.

The remainder of this paper first presents background literature and develops the research hypotheses. Then, research methods are described and study results reported. Finally, managerial implications, study limitations, and directions for future research are offered.

1. Background literature

Extensive empirical work has examined various facets of SFA and CRM, providing an abundance of valuable insights (for in-depth discussions of SFA and CRM research, see, for example, reviews in Landry, Arnold, and Arndt, 2005; Zablah, Bellenger, and Johnston, 2004). One area of keen empirical attention has been on SFA implementation. For example, Keillor et al. (1997), Parthasarathy and Sohi (1997), and Rivers and Dart (1999) provide detailed input on SFA execution. Relatedly, Erffmeyer and Johnson (2001) consider issues associated with SFA implementation and goals. Widmier et al. (2002) observe that

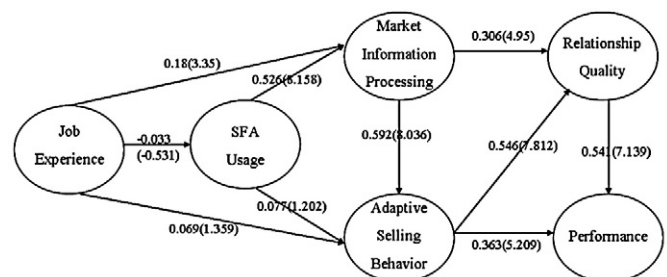


Fig. 1. Structural equation model results. Note: Standardized coefficient with T-value in parentheses. T-values greater than 2.00 are significant (p < .05).

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