



# Conscientiousness, extraversion, and field sales performance: Combining narrow personality, social skill, emotional stability, and nonlinearity



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## ABSTRACT

Although prior research indicated that extraversion and conscientiousness are uniformly beneficial to sales performance, recent evidence suggests that scholars should consider nonlinearity, narrow personality, social skill, and the research context in the personality–performance relation. Further, scholars have found conscientiousness to have inverted U-shaped relationships with performance. Taking these into account, the present study examines the nonlinear relation that the combined conscientiousness facets of discipline and achievement motivation (i.e., disciplined achievement motivation) have with objective sales performance in a predictive study with a nine month time interval. We argue that stable social potency, composed of the activity facet of extraversion, social skill, and emotional stability, will moderate this nonlinear relation in the context of insurance field sales, such that the greatest sales performance will be from those high on both constructs. Our findings support our hypotheses, demonstrating that a relevant social-related trait (i.e., stable social potency) can offset the potential downsides of high disciplined achievement motivation (e.g., perfectionism, and workaholism), helping such individuals to achieve high objective sales. Implications for theory and future research directions are discussed.

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## 1. Introduction

Sales jobs deserve special attention because of their importance to the success of organizations (Vinchur, Schippmann, Switzer, & Roth, 1998). Field sales positions are especially demanding, as the customer needs to be identified and sought out (Blickle et al., 2012), and rejection is an especially common occurrence when selling service products (e.g., insurance; McManus & Kelly, 1999). Consequently, high levels of persuasive effort, perseverance, and composure under pressure are vital to success in sales positions (Vinchur et al., 1998).

Although conscientiousness has been related to sales performance (Vinchur et al., 1998) and career success (Judge & Kammeyer-Mueller, 2012), at high levels, it can be manifested in behaviors unhelpful to work performance (e.g., workaholism and rigidity, Hmel & Pincus, 2002; Samuel, Riddell, Lynam, Miller, & Widiger, 2012). Given the common refrain within personality research to hire and promote individuals high on conscientiousness and the importance of sales positions to organizations, the sales-related pitfalls of high conscientiousness deserve particular attention. The present study seeks to offset these downsides by interactively combining conscientiousness-related traits with sales-relevant socially-related traits, arguing that those high on both will demonstrate the greatest performance.

Further, personality scholars have argued that performance prediction can be enhanced by examining narrow personality (see Robie & Ryan, 1999), aligning personality with a study's context (Tett & Burnett, 2003), and considering nonlinear relations with performance (e.g., Penney, David, & Witt, 2011). The present study employs each of these approaches, examining the nonlinear interaction of disciplined achievement motivation (i.e., combined conscientiousness facets of discipline and achievement motivation) with stable social potency (i.e., the combination of the activity facet of extraversion, social skill, and emotional stability) in prediction of nine-month-later sales performance in the insurance sales context.

## 2. Conscientiousness and extraversion - narrower personality in the sales context

Within sales jobs, conscientiousness and extraversion have been meta-analytically demonstrated to be the strongest predictors of performance (Hurtz & Donovan, 2000; Vinchur et al., 1998). However, researchers have begun to claim that the personality–performance relation may be nonlinear (e.g., Penney et al., 2011), and both conscientiousness (e.g., Le et al., 2011) and extraversion (e.g., Grant, 2013) have demonstrated curvilinear, inverted U-shaped relationships with performance. In addition, these associations could be context dependent (Tett & Burnett, 2003) and narrow personality within the overall factor could have different relations with performance (Robie & Ryan, 1999).

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Although the trend in empirical personality research is to examine facets in exclusion, theory has emphasized matching the bandwidth and relevance of predictor(s) with the criterion (e.g., Paunonen, Rothstein, & Jackson, 1999; Penney et al., 2011). Further, research (e.g., DeYoung, Quilty, & Peterson, 2007) has demonstrated that the Big Five has three bandwidth levels (i.e., factor, aspect, and facet). Consequently, although our outcome (i.e., sales performance) is not as broad as overall performance, neither is it as narrow as a very specific type of sales performance (e.g., with a particular product, sales context, or customer). Therefore, we endeavored to utilize predictors at a similar (i.e., aspect) bandwidth.

Regarding conscientiousness, based on prior research (i.e., Hurtz & Donovan, 2000; Vinchur et al., 1998), we chose two facets (i.e., self-discipline and achievement motivation) that are contained in the same, overarching aspect (i.e., industriousness; DeYoung et al., 2007) and that we believe are those most relevant to the field sales context, naming their combination *disciplined achievement motivation* (DAM). Self-discipline describes the ability to start and complete tasks (Costa & McCrae, 1992), and, using the O\*NET database (Occupational Information Network; Peterson et al., 2001), Sackett and Walmsley (2014) found that dependability, conceptually similar to self-discipline, was the highest ranked attribute in sales jobs. Similarly, achievement motivation refers to a desire to compete with and attain greater competency than others (Baranik, Stanley, Bynum, & Lance, 2010), and it has been linked to many measures of career accomplishment (e.g., decades-later occupational status; Judge & Kammeyer-Mueller, 2012), including objective sales performance (Vinchur et al., 1998; Warr, Bartram, & Martin, 2005).

However, extreme conscientiousness can have negative effects, such as self-critical perfectionism (Dunkley, Blankstein, Zuroff, Lecce, & Hui, 2006) and greater adverse stress reactions to negative feedback (Cianci, Klein, & Seijts, 2010). In field sales positions, negative feedback and rejection from customers is a common occurrence, particularly when selling service products like insurance (McManus & Kelly, 1999). At high levels, achievement motivated individuals can be described as self-focused workaholics, and discipline can become a single-minded rigidity (Hmel & Pincus, 2002; Samuel et al., 2012). Also, research has shown that both self-discipline and impulsivity, conceptually similar to low discipline, have nonlinear relations with outcomes, with moderate levels relating to higher well-being (Carter, Guan, Maples, Williamson, & Miller, 2016) and success (Day & Silverman, 1989) than low or high levels. Thus, it seems that, in isolation, DAM will have an inverted U-shaped relation with sales performance, which is counter to the presumption that high achievement-oriented individuals will produce the highest sales performance (Vinchur et al., 1998).

Consequently, the present study interacts DAM with *stable social potency* (SSP, i.e., the combined traits of the activity facet of extraversion, social skill, and emotional stability) in a nonlinear prediction of objective sales performance. Prior research in other contexts has shown that those simultaneously high on both conscientiousness- and extraversion-related traits have the highest work performance (e.g., Witt, 2002; Witt & Ferris, 2003, Study 4). Moreover, personality scholars have argued that the joint influence of multiple traits should be examined (Penney et al., 2011), and that the inflection point for a nonlinear relation with performance could be different between traits (Pierce & Aguinis, 2013). Thus, we contend that, when interacted with SSP, the detrimental effects of high DAM can be offset, creating a positive and strengthening relation with performance for those high on SSP as DAM increases.

*Activity* describes a desire to remain busy and work rapidly due to feelings of urgency (Costa & McCrae, 1992). Since, in prediction of sales performance, extraversion has shown an inverted U-shaped relation (Grant, 2013) and its credibility interval includes zero (Barrick, Mount, & Judge, 2001), we desired to utilize a specific facet of extraversion, choosing *activity* because, given the demanding nature of

insurance field sales (Blickle et al., 2012; McManus & Kelly, 1999), higher activity should be beneficial to sales performance. Moreover, the inability of a study (i.e., Denis, Morin, & Guindon, 2010) to find a significant relationship between activity and task or global performance in a sample including a range of jobs could indicate the importance of context (e.g., field sales). Also, in a large community sample, the latent factor representing activity had the greatest number of negative associations with psychopathology of any of the four extraversion facets (Watson, Stasik, Ellickson-Larew, & Stanton, 2015), showing activity to be the most adaptive extraversion trait. However, at high levels, activity could result in a zeal to rush and hurry through tasks, despite low quality work. Additionally, Hambrick and McCord (2010) found activity to be negatively related to avoidance coping, and, in a sales context, being unable to disengage from a stressful customer situation (e.g., customer reluctance or rejection) could be viewed as too aggressive and/or would be unproductive, reducing performance.

Thus, we believe that achievement oriented salespersons who are highly active also require heightened social skill and emotional stability to engage in more adaptive responses (e.g., acceptance or avoidance coping) to stressful customer interactions, thereby, improving sales performance. A variety of research has shown that personality needs social skill to affect behavior evaluated by others (see Hogan & Blickle, 2013), including objective sales outcomes (Blickle, Wendel, & Ferris, 2010). Furthermore, the combination of activity and social skill is conceptually similar to the (social) potency construct found to be related to objective sales success (Vinchur et al., 1998; Warr et al., 2005).

Emotional stability is helpful to performance in social jobs, as found across seven studies by Mount, Barrick, and Stewart (1998). The emotionally stable engage in ways of coping (i.e., adaptive, proactive, and strategic) that are more socially conducive, and they are less sensitive to others' emotions (Doherty, 1997), which should be particularly helpful when managing challenging customer relations that threaten sales. Hurtz and Donovan's (2000) meta-analysis showed that emotional stability had nearly as strong a relation with sales performance as did extraversion. Additionally, emotional control is an important element to being social skilled (Riggio, 1986), and the greatest customer service job performance has come from those high on both emotional stability and extraversion (Judge & Erez, 2007), indicating that, in social jobs, their combination is more helpful to performance than either trait in isolation. Lastly, the highly conscientious tend to experience greater negative affect (Fayard, Roberts, Robins, & Watson, 2012), and, thus, the positive relationship between conscientiousness and performance could improve its strength when augmented by emotional stability (see Penney et al., 2011). This research evidence indicates that emotional stability could be helpful to extraversion and conscientiousness traits in sales contexts.

In short, we argue that when stable social potency (SSP) is low, disciplined achievement motivation (DAM) will maintain an inverted U-shaped relation with objective sales performance. Whereas, higher levels of SSP will create an increasingly positive relationship of DAM with performance, such that those high on both will have the highest performance.

**Hypothesis 1.** SSP moderates the quadratic relation between DAM and sales performance.

**Hypothesis 1a.** When SSP is low, there is a curvilinear relation between DAM and sales performance, such that the relation is initially positive but becomes weaker as DAM increases. When DAM further increases, the relation becomes negative.

**Hypothesis 1b.** When SSP is high, there is a positively growing relation between DAM and sales performance, such that the relation is initially positive and becomes more positive as DAM increases.

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