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Commitment to technological change, sales force intelligence norms, and salesperson key outcomes

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ABSTRACT

Despite increasing interest in sales technology investments, companies continue to struggle with getting their salespeople to use these expensive technologies. In this context, two under-researched issues warrant attention. First, although sales technology represents a continuous source of change, little is known about why salespeople *commit* to technology-induced changes. Second, knowledge on whether *sales force intelligence norms* play a role into translating use of sales technology to performance gains is remarkably sparse. To address these gaps, this study develops a conceptual framework that explores the linear and non-linear effects of commitment to technological change (i.e., affective, normative, and continuance) on sales technology infusion, and, in turn, on two key outcomes (i.e., customer-oriented selling and sales performance). Our framework also advances knowledge on how sales force intelligence norms (i.e., analytical sales processes and knowledge sharing with customers) moderate the relationships between sales technology infusion and key outcomes. Analysis is done using multilevel structural equation modeling on a sample of 303 salespeople nested within 22 firms. Findings support the view that the three components of commitment are distinct, with some counter-intuitive results. Specifically, affective commitment does not exert a significant positive influence as expected; yet, normative commitment does. In contrast, while lower levels of continuance commitment reduce infusion, higher levels have positive effects, thus depicting a U-shaped effect. Finally, sales technology infusion influences both key outcomes — and findings support the importance of fostering sales force intelligence norms. Implications of the study are discussed.

1. Introduction

Salespeople are curators of knowledge, and in an era marked by unprecedented and increasingly complex information, most business to business (B2B) sales jobs are impossible to perform without a heavy dependence on sales technology. Indeed, technology applications such as social customer relationship management (CRM), tablets, and mobile tools are mandated for implementing predictive analytics or big data initiatives (Accenture, 2013). Unfortunately, more than half of the companies recently surveyed continue to struggle with getting their salespeople to use these technologies (Accenture, 2012), whereas most companies realize no benefit to revenue (Miller Heiman, 2014). This disconcerting reality is further amplified when one considers the vertiginous costs associated with implementing sales technologies (Greenberg, 2010). Reflecting the magnitude of this problem for sales organizations, a burgeoning sales technology literature has emerged (e.g., Ahearne, Hughes, & Schillewaert, 2007; Ahearne, Jones, Rapp, & Mathieu, 2008; Avlonitis & Panagopoulos, 2005; Homburg, Wieseke, & Bornemann, 2009; Homburg, Wieseke, & Kuehnl, 2009; Hunter & Perreault, 2006, 2007). While this literature has generated important insights, two notable research questions remain unanswered.

First, little is known about why salespeople commit to the change that accompanies the continuous potential for improvements afforded through new sales technology tools. Change, however, appears to be omnipresent in the domain of sales technology (Ahearne, Lam, Mathieu, & Bolander, 2010). Such changes often alter work routines while disrupting the organization's social fabric (Herold, Fedor, Caldwell, & Liu, 2008). Indeed, companies continuously re-engineer the portfolio of sales technologies made available to salespeople by updating or upgrading existing tools and processes such as the recent move to cloud-based or social CRM applications. Nonetheless, to achieve key outcomes, salespeople must find new ways to integrate an optimal set of technologies into evolving relational selling processes. This aspect of the salesperson's role assumes great importance in light of the fact that technological change alters a salesperson's attitudinal dispositions towards sales technology implementations, shifting critical perceptions such as their commitment to embracing such changes. If firms want to realize return on sales technology investments, they need a better understanding of the underlying attitudinal mechanisms that produce

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measurable results. Our study fills this gap by investigating the effects of salespeople's commitment to sales technology-induced change on the infusion of the technology into their job. In doing so, we make an additional contribution to the wider marketing literature by getting beyond the more limited insights afforded through single or two-dimensional conceptualizations of commitment that have dominated previous research (e.g., Maignan, Ferrell, & Hult, 1999; Morgan & Hunt, 1994) and employ three dimensions of commitment (i.e., affective, continuance, and normative), each with a common focus on sales technology-induced change. Finally, our research explicitly acknowledges that specific components of commitment (i.e., continuance commitment) may exert curvilinear effects on sales technology infusion. Testing such complex nuances allows us to shed light to intriguing mechanisms underlying salespeople's commitment to technological change, while also contributing to the equivocal and limited research investigating nonlinear effects of commitment (Finegan, 2000; Meyer, Irving, & Allen, 1998).

Second, knowledge on whether attributes of the organizational culture, such as norms, play a role in translating use of sales technology to performance gains is remarkably sparse. However, prior studies outside the marketing literature evidence the pivotal role of norms in technology implementation (Jones, Jimmieson, & Griffiths, 2005) and suggest the simultaneous consideration of key components of organizational culture (Heracleous & Barrett, 2001). In addition, corporate reality pinpoints that firms foster a culture of analytically-driven sales processes, whereby salespeople are expected to adhere to analyzing data to gain deep insights on customer needs (e.g., Homburg, Wieseke, & Bornemann, 2009; Homburg, Wieseke, & Kuehnl, 2009; Kohli & Jaworski, 1990). Salespeople today are knowledge workers (Sheth & Sobel, 2000) providing the organization with capacity for knowledge sharing through technology-dependent, analytical sales processes. Recent meta-analytical evidence, for instance, shows that salespeople have become knowledge brokers who search, leverage, and develop customer-specific knowledge to co-create solutions for customers (Verbeke, Dietz, & Verwaal, 2011). To fill this gap, here we investigate the role of firm-level, sales force intelligence norms (i.e., analytical sales processes, and knowledge sharing with customers) in improving sales technology returns on key outcomes (i.e., customer-oriented selling and sales performance).

The following section articulates the literary background and framework for this study. After formal hypothesis development, the paper details its multilevel structural equation modeling specification and then tests and reports measurement and structural properties. After discussing implications for scholarship and practice, the manuscript concludes by outlining limitations and opportunities for future research.

2. Conceptual background

2.1. Background literature

We conducted a comprehensive review of the extant literature on the consequences of commitment to change to gain insights and inform the development of our conceptual framework. We electronically searched for relevant articles across 26 different journals in the fields of marketing, sales, management, and psychology spanning almost 35 years of research (see Table 1 for a summary of the findings). Four major conclusions can be drawn from our review. First, ours is the first study to propose a measure specifically for the different components of commitment to technological change; the scales employed in prior studies were designed to capture the components of general commitment to change. Second, the majority of the studies examine one or two commitment components; as such, continuance commitment to change has only been employed in 4 studies. Third, commitment to change (especially the affective and the normative components) is positively related to the focal change behaviors investigated in prior studies. Fourth, there were only 3 studies that examined key outcomes, such as turnover or improved organizational performance but none examined the effect of the focal behavior on individual (employee) performance. Fifth, there were only 2 studies that have examined moderating effects and these studies have focused on the interactions among different components of commitment to change as predictors of the focal behavior rather than as predictors of outcomes such as turnover or performance. Thus, the role of moderating factors from the wider micro- or macro-environmental context in the relationship between the focal behavior and outcomes has not previously been examined. More broadly, these characterizations of the commitment to change literature appear consistent with theoretical work in the wider domain of commitment theory, where moderating effects have not been a focal concern (see, for instance, Meyer & Herscovitch, 2001; Meyer, Becker, & Vandenberghe, 2004).

2.2. Conceptual framework

Drawing on the results of our literature review and consistent with the tenets of commitment theory (e.g., Herscovitch & Meyer, 2002; Meyer & Herscovitch, 2001; Meyer, Stanley, Herscovitch, & Topolnytsky, 2002), here we posit that the three components of salesperson commitment to technological change (i.e., an attitudinal variable) will be related to sales technology infusion (i.e., the focal behavior) and, in turn, to two key salesperson outcomes (i.e., customer-oriented selling and sales performance). Fig. 1 presents an overview of our conceptual framework.

As mentioned previously, both theoretical and empirical work in the area of commitment to change is rather silent on the boundary conditions that frame the effects of the focal behavior on outcome variables such as performance. To enrich our investigation, and therefore fill this gap, we draw upon Weitz's (1981) contingency framework for understanding salesperson performance. Doing so allows us to investigate the role of sales force intelligence norms, which manifest at the firm's microenvironmental level, in the effects of sales technology infusion on key outcomes. Specifically, Weitz proposes that microenvironmental characteristics function as boundary conditions that moderate the effects of salesperson behaviors, such as sales technology infusion, on outcomes. Accordingly, this study examines sales force intelligence norms as a boundary condition in the individual-level relationships between the focal salesperson behavior (i.e., sales technology infusion) and key outcomes (i.e., customer-oriented selling and sales performance). By examining the conditions that frame the effects of sales technology infusion on salesperson key outcomes, we provide a more complete picture for practitioners who, as mentioned previously, are interested in realizing performance benefits from technology implementations. We next elaborate on each construct in our framework.

2.3. Commitment to technological change

Recent developments in the extant literature on organizational commitment establish the recognition that an individual's commitment can take different forms and can be directed towards various foci (Becker, Billings, Eveleth, & Gilbert, 1996; Meyer et al., 2004). First, Meyer and Allen's (1991) three-component model – which is regarded as the most widely employed model of commitment (Meyer et al., 2002) – distinguishes among three different motives that produce three different forms of commitment: affective commitment reflecting motives of 'benefit-seeking', continuance commitment reflecting 'cost-avoiding' motives, and normative commitment reflecting 'obligation-serving' motives. An extensive body of research supports the view that dimensionality matters and demonstrates that each component of commitment may have different implications for focal behavior (e.g., Meyer et al., 2002).

Second, the acknowledgement that different foci of commitment exist refers to the fact that commitment may center on different targets within or external to an organization to which an employee is exposed like the organization, supervisor, profession, or change (Meyer et al.,