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The effect of ‘can do’ and ‘reason to’ motivations on service–sales ambidexterity

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ABSTRACT

Salespersons are increasingly expected to explore cross-/up-selling opportunities while simultaneously fulfilling customer service requests; an activity known as service–sales ambidexterity. Engaging simultaneously in these seemingly conflicting tasks may pose self-regulatory and motivational challenges for salespersons. Drawing from regulatory mode and self-determination theories, this study argues that salespersons' engagement in service–sales ambidexterity is driven by the ‘can do’ motivations of locomotion and assessment orientations, and the ‘reason to’ motivations of enjoyment of work and driven to work. This study contributes to the new literature stream on service–sales ambidexterity by testing a model that integrates the two behavioral motivation explanations. Results indicate that service–sales ambidexterity is jointly determined by the ‘can do’ and the ‘reason to’ motivations, both directly and through their interactions. The study offers new theoretical and managerial implications on ambidexterity at the individual level of analysis.

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1. Introduction

To increase revenue and deliver high-quality customer service, firms need to blend selling and service activities. Employees dealing directly with customers (e.g., salespersons, front-line service employees) are under increased pressure to divide their efforts and simultaneously engage in cross-/up-selling opportunities and fulfill service requests (Jasmand, Blazevic, & de Ruyter, 2012; Yu, Patterson, & de Ruyter, 2013). Cross-/up-selling and customer service provision are different, if not conflicting, tasks and engaging simultaneously in these tasks (hereinafter referred to as ‘service–sales ambidexterity’) requires a proactive effort that may pose self-regulatory and motivational challenges for employees (Jasmand et al., 2012).

Prior research demonstrates that service–sales ambidexterity is driven by two types of ‘can do’ motivations: locomotion orientation and assessment orientation. These are two key dimensions of the regulatory mode theory. These two different orientations reflect individuals' perceived capacity to succeed in a task and their self-started behavior in pursuing goals (Higgins, Kruglanski, & Pierro, 2003). Locomotion orientation constitutes “the aspect of self-regulation concerned with movement from state to state and with committing the psychological resources that will initiate and maintain goal-related movement in a straightforward and direct manner, without undue distractions or delay” (Kruglanski et al., 2000, p. 794). Assessment orientation, on the

other hand, constitutes “the comparative aspect of self-regulation concerned with critically evaluating entities or states, such as goals or means, in relation to alternatives in order to judge relative quality” (Kruglanski et al., 2000, p. 794). Locomotion-oriented people feel rewarded by constantly moving from one activity to the next; in contrast, assessment-oriented people feel rewarded by waiting and evaluating all possible options in a comprehensive way before deciding how to act (Avnet & Higgins, 2003; Higgins et al., 2003).

While previous research attests that employees must be highly motivated to succeed before engaging in service–sales ambidexterity, a related argument is that individuals engage in complex and demanding activities not simply because they feel they can do it, but also because they establish solid reasons that guide their efforts (Parker, Bindl, & Strauss, 2010). Hence, we argue that service–sales ambidexterity is not only driven by the ‘can do’ motivations, but also by the ‘reason to’ motivations, reflecting the motivations that underlie goal-directed behaviors. These ‘reason to’ motivations reflect individuals' perception of their reasons for engaging in an activity (Graves, Ruderman, Ohlott, & Weber, 2012). Self-determination theory suggests various types of motivation that regulate goal-directed behaviors (Ryan & Connell, 1989; Ryan & Deci, 2000). Following the approach of Graves et al. (2012), we focus on two key dimensions of the ‘reason to’ motivation: *driven to work* and *enjoyment of work*. Driven to work represents an urge to work which is rooted in inner ‘shoulds’, while enjoyment of work represents the degree to which individuals find the work itself intrinsically interesting (Graves et al., 2012).

We draw on prior frameworks on the drivers of proactive behavior (Parker et al., 2010) and examine the simultaneous role of regulatory

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mode theory and self-determination theory as explanatory mechanisms for service–sales ambidexterity. This study contributes to the young and emerging stream of literature on service–sales ambidexterity by testing a model that integrates the two behavioral motivations – the ‘can do’ and the ‘reason to’ motivations – in a single framework. Theoretically, understanding the ‘reason to’ motivations in addition to the ‘can do’ motivations as drivers of service–sales ambidexterity is critical because it allows us to account for both sides of the coin – the ‘I can do this’ described by regulatory mode theory (Higgins et al., 2003) and the ‘why I do this’ described by self-determination theory (Ryan & Connell, 1989; Ryan & Deci, 2000). In doing so, we offer a more comprehensive explanation of the mechanisms behind resource allocations by individual salespersons when they proactively engage in service–sales ambidexterity.

This contribution is important as extant empirical research focusing only on the ‘can do’ side of the coin may have overemphasized the prominence of only a subset of relevant motivational factors. In fact, prior studies advocate that enjoyment of work and driven to work motivations drive specific patterns of behavior that may affect a salesperson's performance (e.g., Deci & Ryan, 2000; Gagné & Deci, 2005; Porter, 2001). While enjoyment of work is related to positive work behavior, driven to work is often associated with increased stress and anxiety (Graves et al., 2012). Given the potential consequences of enjoyment of work and driven to work, it is of theoretical and practical significance to investigate how these two motivations affect a salesperson's work behavior, above and beyond the documented effects of locomotion and assessment orientation. From the managerial relevance standpoint, our research provides a framework that managers can use to make strategic decisions regarding recruitment, training, coaching, and job environment design, with the ultimate aim of increasing service–sales ambidexterity. Our conceptual framework and contribution are represented in Fig. 1.

2. Theoretical background and research hypotheses

Ambidexterity is an important concept in the marketing and management domain. Researchers in business-to-business (B2B) marketing have adopted this concept to examine the benefits firms derive from pursuing the conflicting activities of exploitation and exploration

(e.g., O'Cass, Heirati, & Ngo, 2014). Exploitation and exploration activities are different and non-substitutable. While exploitation reflects the firm's capacity to refine, implement, and execute current tasks better, exploration reflects the firm's capacity to search, discover, and take risks to enhance flexibility and variability (Levinthal & March, 1993; March, 1991). Ambidexterity scholars argue that firms must strive to achieve complementarity and execute both activities simultaneously in order to stay competitive (e.g., Gibson & Birkinshaw, 2004; Levinthal & March, 1993). While prior studies support the view that ambidexterity enhances firm performance (Raisch & Birkinshaw, 2008), conflicting demands and competition for limited resources make ambidexterity difficult to achieve (Gupta, Smith, & Shalley, 2006; March, 1991).

A review of the ambidexterity literature suggests that various theoretical perspectives – structural, contextual, sequential, and realized perspectives – propose ways to manage the tensions between conflicting tasks (Gupta et al., 2006; O'Cass et al., 2014; Simsek, 2009). According to the structural ambidexterity perspective, firms use structural mechanisms to deviate the tensions that arise from their conflicting goals by developing different specialist business units (or sub-units) (Gupta et al., 2006). Contextual ambidexterity contends that firms strive for a balance between opposing and complementary attributes within an organizational unit (Ghoshal & Bartlett, 1994) or support individuals to embrace conflicting activities and goals (Mom, Van Den Bosch, & Volberda, 2009; Sok & O'Cass, 2015). Following sequential ambidexterity firms go through cycles of opposing activities to achieve ambidexterity over time, rather than concurrently (Gupta et al., 2006). The final perspective – realized ambidexterity – advances that a firm's ability to manage the tension between opposing activities hinges on the extent to which these activities are treated as competing or orthogonal forces (Gupta et al., 2006; Simsek, 2009).

Researchers subscribing to a structural view conceive ambidexterity at the firm and business-unit levels, and initially questioned the co-existence of exploration and exploitation at the individual employee level (e.g., Gupta et al., 2006; March, 1991). More recently, however, scholars have instead supported the tenet that employees can simultaneously and sequentially attend to exploratory and exploitative tasks (e.g., Adler, Goldoftas, & Levine, 1999; Mom et al., 2009). Raisch, Probst, and Tushman (2009) call for a conceptual and empirically-validated understanding of employee-level ambidexterity. Jasmand

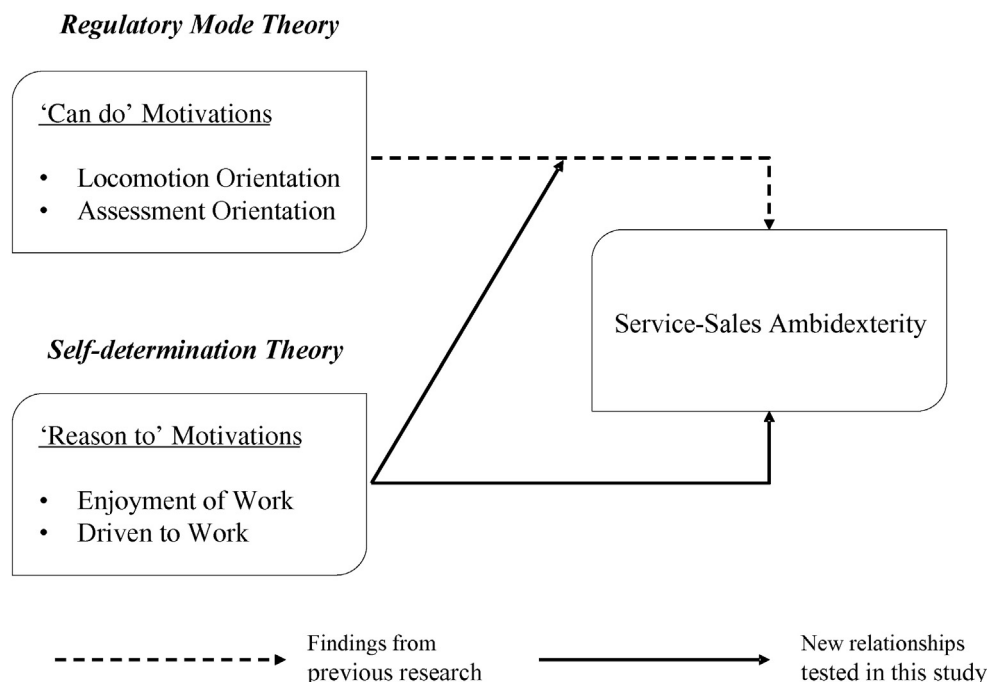


Fig. 1. Conceptual framework and contribution.

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