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Deliberate Learning as a Strategic Mechanism in Enabling Channel Partner Sales Performance

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Abstract

As suppliers increasingly depend on their indirect sales channel, enablement of channel partners has become a strategic asset. We focus on the central role of deliberate learning within strategic enablement strategy. Specifically, we conceptualize deliberate sales learning as a three-dimensional construct (knowledge articulation, knowledge codification, knowledge certification) and identify the mechanisms through which it impacts on channel partner sales performance. Based on a survey of channel partners (N=383) of an FT100 company, we establish exploitative and explorative learning orientations as antecedents of deliberate sales learning, where this relationship is moderated by channel partners' preference for online learning formats. The relatively weaker relationship between explorative learning orientation and deliberate sales learning is positively enhanced for those channel partners with a preference for interactive online modules. Further, we demonstrate that deliberate sales learning and deliberate sales practice act in serial mediation to positively impact sales performance. In addition to future research opportunities, we identify three core implications for the practice of strategic sales enablement; enhancing return on investment, managing learner motivation and activating learning engagement of channel partners.

Keywords: strategic enablement, deliberate learning, learning orientation, sales performance, channel partners

Deliberate Learning as a Strategic Mechanism in Enabling Channel Partner Sales Performance

Introduction

For most suppliers operating in business markets, channel partners are key in driving sales and revenues, unlocking new markets, decreasing time to market, as well as providing information for new offering development (Keeling et al., 2019). For instance, in high-technology markets, channel partners generate two-thirds of total revenue for key players; SAP generates about a third of its sales through this indirect channel and Cisco derives 80% of its revenues through its channel partners. Similar statistics have been reported for other business sectors, such as home renovation, business travel and financial services (Aguirre et al., 2018). At the same time, industrial selling has become increasingly complex and multifarious, with mounting demands on channel partners to deal with rapid changes in sales automation, shorter life cycles, increased competition and globalization of markets. With their sales performance under pressure, channel partners need to continually update and expand their knowledge and selling skills to execute their sales role effectively and remain an attractive, value-adding re-seller (Dubinsky, 1999). This role has expanded as suppliers turn to channel partners for advice and problem-solving expertise needed to access markets.

It is increasingly acknowledged by suppliers that enablement of channel partner sales performance is a strategic asset with a direct impact on the bottom-line. For instance, a recent market survey (Highspot, 2019) reveals that sales win rates improve by 49% and a 35% improvement in sales quota attainment is reported as a consequence of having an enablement strategy in place. Consequently, many suppliers have launched strategic enablement programs. One example of these programs is the Lenovo's Expert Achievers Programme (LEAP), a worldwide channel partner portal which combines sales support and incentivization with a broad range of online sales education, focusing on business-critical

sales competencies. Likewise, IBM's KYI (Know Your IBM) is a global learning management system that offers thousands of online modules and certification tracks, discussion forums and virtual meeting rooms for collaborative learning. Many enablement programs have been recently launched by non-IT vendors as well; Celebrity Cruises, APC-Schneider Electric and Grohe.

Given the business-critical importance of these sales enablement initiatives and the considerable cost involved in launching and maintaining them, there is a prevalent need for developing a better understanding of how strategic enablement translates into higher sales performance. To cater to that need, we turn to emerging scholarship on organizational learning. This type of learning has been studied from a number of domain-specific angles in marketing, such as product innovation, new service development, digitalization and smart technologies market orientation and the organizational front line (Ye et al., 2012; Marinova et al., 2017). Generically, research shows that learning is a key factor in developing a unique competitive advantage for firms (e.g., Homburg et al., 2009).

However, in relation to the strategic enablement of channel partners several gaps in our understanding exist. It has been argued and shown that in addition to the accumulation of experience, organizations need to enable deliberate forms of learning (Evangelista & Mac, 2016). A well-known classification framework for deliberate learning has been developed by Zollo and Winter (2002) who argue that in addition to pragmatic, experience-based learning (i.e., learning on the job), deliberate learning consists of (1) articulation and (2) codification of knowledge. However, this framework does not take into account that channel partners often engage in self-directed (online) learning on the basis of learning roadmaps to certification (Hochmuth, 2004). Also, we need to develop a more in-depth understanding of specific antecedents of channel partner learning. Thus far, previous research findings vary considerably with respect to the strength of the learning – performance relationship (Boyer et

al., 2014). Finally, there is considerable heterogeneity as to the impact of motivation on learning and preferred learning format (Bussell et al., 2017). In order to address these gaps in our understanding of strategic sales enablement, this paper aims to further examine how it translates in sales performance.

Specifically, we make three contributions. Firstly, we extend the focal construct of deliberate sales learning to include certification as an underlying dimension. Thus, we conceptualize and empirically assess the deliberative process of acquiring know-how and skills as a second-order construct consisting of three distinct dimensions; articulation, codification and certification. These dimensions form a comprehensive learning mechanism that is aimed at expanding know-how and skills in relation to selling tasks. While each dimension has been treated as conceptually distinct, we argue that they are reflective of the higher order deliberate accumulation of sales knowledge and skills by channel partners (c.f., Kale & Singh, 2007; Assadinia et al., 2019). Secondly, we develop a conceptual framework that examines exploitative and explorative learning motivations as predictors of deliberate sales learning (c.f., Holmqvist, 2004). We assess, through sequential mediation in conjunction with the complementary concept of deliberate sales practice, the impact of deliberate sales learning on channel partner sales performance. Finally, we contribute to the scholarship on strategic sales enablement by theorizing and empirically exploring learning format (c.f., Sims & Schuman, 1999) as an important contingency in the formation of channel partner deliberate sales learning.

In order to realize these contributions, this paper proceeds as follows. We start by developing a framework that introduces the main concepts and develops a series of hypotheses to highlight the relationships between these concepts. Next, we present the results of an empirical study that tests our model on the basis of a survey among channel partners. We conclude the paper by offering a discussion of the theoretical and managerial

implications of our findings and suggest research directions to guide future research on strategic enablement.

Conceptual Framework Development

We define strategic sales enablement as the process of educating and engaging channel partners in selling more effectively with the objective of increasing sales performance, expanding business and creating more sustainable partnerships. Comprehensive online platforms have been deployed that provide a hub of channel partner learning, with social functionalities and incentivization to stimulate deliberate development of sales knowledge and skills. Enablement content is now delivered across a plethora of platforms, varying from video streaming to interactive modules to webinars. Learning roadmaps are an integral element and assist learners in combining learning content to pursue certification.

Pertinent to strategic enablement, it has been widely recognized that the development of new knowledge and skills is crucial to an effective functioning of the organizational frontline (Ye et al., 2012) and this applies both to the direct sales channel, which uses an in-company sales force, and the use of an indirect sales strategy centered around a network of channel partners. In both market-facing roles, sales associates operate in increasingly turbulent environments, fueled by heterogeneous customer needs, new technologies, data-driven decision-making and business models. In addition to these emerging realities associated with the expectations of the role, channel partners are often expected to go the extra mile and engage in extra-role behavior. As channel partners interact with end-customers their capability to acquire and apply new knowledge and skills is an important source of competitive advantage across many business markets (Nonaka, 1994). They are increasingly aware that they need to invest time and effort in learning in order to contribute to value-creation and meeting performance indicators. This underscores the importance of

understanding the motivation of channel partners to make these investments and deliberately engage in learning activities (Pelser et al., 2015).

The impact of learning on the performance of the organizational frontline has been studied at different levels, varying from the individual to intra-organizational (Slater & Narver, 1995), inter-organizational (Lane & Lubatkin, 1998) and network (Goyal, 2011). However, Foss et al. (2010) argue that ultimately learning happens at the level of individuals and that, as a result, it is important to focus on individual motivations, activities and performance assessments. Hence, we will both conceptualize and empirically assess strategic sales enablement at the individual level.

In addition to levels, different types of frontline learning are recognized in the existing body of literature. The prevalent focus is on the generation of knowledge on the basis of day-to-day and on-the-job experience. The transformation of individual experiences into knowledge is often referred to as pragmatic learning (Jayanti & Singh, 2010). In relation to the organizational frontline, pragmatic learning is the result of an iterative and unconscious process, across multiple encounters with customers and based on individual action and assessment (Elkjaer, 2004). As a result, the knowledge obtained is specific rather than generic and, thus, less transferable, generalizable and perhaps less strategic (Marinova et al., 2017). Therefore, the clear need for deliberate learning which “*emphasizes more cognitive aspects of the learning process and focuses on the effect of planned processes for acquiring, codifying, and transferring existing knowledge within and between organizations*” (Arthur & Huntley, (2005, p. 1160) has been acknowledged. As Ye et al. (2012) argue, recognizing the role that deliberate learning plays allows for a better understanding of how the routines characteristic of the organizational frontline are adapted and developed on a daily basis. Conversely, acknowledgment of deliberate learning as a dynamic capability also allows us to advance our

understanding of how enablement can actively (i.e., strategically) contribute to purposefully change channel partner actions for improved performance (Assadinia et al., 2019).

Commonly, deliberate learning refers to two types of learning activities; (1) articulation and (2) codification of knowledge (Zollo & Winter, 2002). Articulation of knowledge refers to activities that are oriented to finding out what works (or does not work) and engaging in discussions on whether a given routine enables the attainment of organizational objectives. In order to disseminate knowledge, channel partners need to express their views and be prepared to discuss and challenge perspectives and observations in sales meetings, role plays, debriefing sessions and performance assessments (Zollo & Winter, 2002). In this way a shared understanding can be reached and knowledge on how to sell new product offerings, understand customer needs and grasp developments in markets can be built and transformed into (more effective) action. Sales performance subsequently improves as channel partners reflect on the consequences of their actions for the bottom-line, for instance, through performance evaluations and progress towards sales objectives. By exchanging views and experiences, channel partners learn about factors that impact desirable outcomes. Reflecting and articulating knowledge acquisition strategies and deliberate challenges of existing routines facilitate goal attainment.

Knowledge codification refers to the use of systems, process tools, manuals and frameworks for storing the generated and articulated findings and add to the collective customer and market intelligence for competitive positioning. Codification enables clarification of ideas and proposals and addresses their logic in relation to deployment of processes. It also allows for questioning underlying assumptions and relating routines and procedures to strategic objectives and values. It helps in knowledge dissemination and sharing particularly when knowledge pertains to complex and multi-actor sales or service processes in B2B environments (Fletcher & Prashantham, 2011). Codification helps in

identifying successful routines and it reduces the risks of routines and procedures that may backfire. For example, drawing up risk registers helps in mitigating factors that potentially would stand in the way of a successful introduction of a new offering (Håkanson, 2007). Most codifications are used to provide guidelines and illustrations to achieving objectives and a widely used format is the use of short business cases to illustrate the logic between a course of action and ensuing performance outcomes. As a result of the process of writing or reading case-based evidence, knowledge is acquired from the exposition of assumptions and steps that were taken. Zollo and Winter (2002) argue that codification of knowledge assists in achieving wider diffusion, sense-making and replication as well as the generation of new insights. This makes knowledge codification an integral part of a company's enablement strategy.

We argue that deliberate learning, particularly in the context of channel partner enablement, entails a third dimension – knowledge certification. Certification of knowledge is a formalized process of validating channel partner know-how and skills (Storey et al., 2018). It includes both setting standards and establishing a track that informs learners how these standards can be attained through learning roadmaps and the wider context of a curriculum. Certification of knowledge relates to activities and processes aimed at facilitating the absorption of knowledge and skills by channel partners (Kale & Singh, 2007). Whilst certification identifies how knowledge resources are related and can be combined, this is often associated with competence testing and tier levels. For example, SAS distinguishes between silver, gold and platinum partners depending on how many employees of partner firms have passed specific learning modules. Often, certification evolves from channel partner demand for knowledge and skills. In many channel partner programs there is a move to enable channel partners to actively engage in the shaping of their knowledge certification. That is, learners can combine a number of pre-identified resources that are associated with

knowledge and skills, to compose their own learning roadmaps in conjunction with the specification of learning objectives. By engaging with learning content and intentionally combining learning resources, channel partners not only improve their skills, they also shape how they signal their position in competency networks as certification represents specific competencies. Applied in this way, certification has been recognized as a meta-cognition activity that assists in making explicit knowledge and skills (Kalyanam & Brar, 2009). In many channel programs certification renewal is used as a part of an enablement strategy to ensure that channel partners maintain their commitment and remain enabled.

A core tenet in the emerging body of scholarship on deliberate learning is that it predicts and translates into improved performance. Given the complexity of deliberate learning, the fact that most of it occurs outside ‘controlled’ environments, such as class rooms, and the constant presence of competing demands for cognitive and socio-emotional resources, McCall et al. (1988) argue that the effect of deliberate learning on performance may be ad hoc at best. Research demonstrates that it is important to explicitly recognize the role of deliberate practice as a proximal consequence of deliberate learning (Ericsson et al., 2007). For learning to result in the more distal construct of (sales) performance, there is a need that learners engage in behavioral strategies and activities. The central assumption is that mere practice is not enough to achieve expertise, but that focused efforts are needed. Deliberate practice refers to the *‘pursuit of a new challenge that pushes someone to go beyond his or her current achievement level’* (Day, 2010. p. 43). Deliberate practice is conceptualized to be challenging, effortful, and not inherently enjoyable. In addition, Ericsson et al. (2007) argues that deliberate practice refers to a type of activity that adds to existing work routines and processes.

In relation to factors that shape deliberate learning activities, theorists have developed the conception of goal orientation, which explores the motivation of individuals to develop

and/or demonstrate his/her capabilities in achievement situations (Dweck & Leggett, 1988). There is ample evidence that people with a generic learning orientation are convinced that they will be able to increase their ability through mastery activities and are inherently motivated to engage in knowledge and skills development. Against the backdrop of dynamic and rapidly evolving business markets, two types of learning orientations have been discerned (March, 1991). Learning can be pursued by exploring new knowledge for innovating in pursuit of new opportunities and exploiting current know-how and skills in order to attain current business objectives. An explorative learning orientation reflects a preference for knowledge and skills that are further away from existing knowledge. Exploration is, thus, aimed at activities that are intended to evaluate a new range of options and identifying the most effective ways of evaluating them. An exploitative learning orientation is primarily aimed at refining existing knowledge and skills. An exploitation can also refer to the replication of existing routines to particular tasks. Exploitation is often associated with current viability of learning, while exploration in learning is associated more often with longer-term or future goals. Moller and Svahn (2006) argue that people who pursue incremental gains in knowledge and skills are not as perceptive to new offerings and developments in markets and the need and sense of urgency to continually develop knowledge to remain agile. There exists near consensus on the need for balancing the two orientations within firms and teams, but there is considerably less clarity on how both orientations impact deliberate learning activities by market-facing actors.

Finally, the range of learning formats for knowledge and skills development has been extended considerably to adapt to new demands on learning professional skills. It has been acknowledged that providing self-regulated learning requires suitable learning formats environments to provide employees with the necessary opportunities to learn when and where it suits them most (Areglado, 1996). In the business practice of strategic enablement, the

pursuit of improved instructional methods and techniques has led to the availability of a variety of learning formats and heterogeneity in learning format preferences from traditional online presentations through instructional video streaming to interactive online learning modules. In addition, mobile platforms enable enhanced convenience and efficiency, and introduces more flexible opportunities for deliberate learning. As self-directed learning in digital learning contexts increases, there is a concomitant growing preference for learning formats that incorporate interactivity (Curran et al., 2017). In the next section, we explore the relationship between the aforementioned concepts by developing a set of hypotheses for the context of strategic sales enablement.

Hypotheses development

In general, a learning orientation (as opposed to performance orientation) has been demonstrated to exert a positive influence on self-regulated and deliberate learning. Individuals with a learning orientation tend to believe that their ability will be improved by investing effort and time in deliberate knowledge and skills development. Research on organizational learning underscores the use of existing knowledge and the attainment of new knowledge to learning behaviors (Zollo & Winter, 2002). In dynamic environments, channel partners need to synthesize and acquire knowledge and skills, whilst applying these to new offerings, technology and market opportunities (Aragón-Correa et al., 2007). In our context, deliberate sales learning would, thus, necessitate refreshing and refining existing competencies (e.g., sales planning practices) and routines as well as developing new routines through certification (e.g., experimenting with selling through coalition programs) (Hult et al., 2004). An exploitative learning orientation should drive deliberate sales learning through the need to experiment and push the boundaries of knowledge through articulation and codification of new routines (Zollo & Winter, 2002). In addition, channel partners need exploitation to extract know-how from existing routines (Jansen et al., 2009). As deliberate

sales learning can be viewed as a dynamic capability to reflect on existing routines and develop new ones, both explorative and exploitative learning orientations will cultivate deliberate attempts to refine and develop mental models of channel partners that contribute to improving their sales performance. Indeed, such ambidextrous learning has been conceptualized and empirically assessed by taking into account the relative magnitude of exploitation and exploration (Cao et al., 2009; de Ruyter et al., 2020). This is also in line with the conceptualization of deliberate learning as a dynamic capability; deliberate learning that is informed by the co-existence of an orientation for exploiting and exploring knowledge (Zollo & Winter, 2002). This allows for examining distinct types of learning orientations and their impact on, in our context, deliberate sales learning (Lubatkin et al., 2006). Both types of learning orientations, therefore, will be key to the occurrence of deliberate sales learning. Thus, we hypothesize:

H1 There will be a positive relationship between explorative learning orientation and deliberate sales learning.

H2 There will be a positive relationship between exploitative learning orientation and deliberate sales learning.

There is accumulating evidence that improvement of performance does not arise solely from learning but that it is a consequence of the amount of deliberate practice (Day, 2010). One important reason is that the active maintenance and upkeep of knowledge and skills benefits from active practicing of learning. Knowles et al. (2005) argue that in relation to organizational learning it is vital to discourage passivity and to encourage learners to actively engage with learning. Therefore, once knowledge has been acquired, it needs to inform deliberate behavioral engagement in order to produce elevated performance levels on the basis of experience and feedback (Ericsson, 2009). In our specific context, this would

translate to deliberative sales practice. Ericsson and Lehmann (1996) have shown that performance levels are frequently only weakly directly associated with learning. At the same time, it has been demonstrated across a variety of domains that deliberate practice has an impact on performance (Keith & Ericsson, 2007). This leads us to hypothesize that:

H3: The positive relationship between deliberate sales learning and sales performance will be mediated by deliberate sales practice.

In relation to organizational learning, we argue that preference for learning format or knowledge delivery mode should be taken into account when assessing the impact of learning motivations on deliberate sales learning. Research has pointed to the importance of preferences for learning formats as vital drivers of knowledge acquisition in relation to learning motivation (Duff et al., 2004). Learners who are motivated by a learning orientation are not only more cognitively engaged with learning content, they also wish to actively interact with the material. Conversely, pragmatic and results-driven learners have a preference for accessible processing of information and non-interactive formats (Duff, 2003). Based on this, we hypothesize that the impact of both explorative and exploitative learning orientations on deliberate sales learning is enhanced for channel partners who have a preference for an interactive learning format (i.e., interactive modules) as opposed to those who have a preference for non-interactive formats (i.e., online presentation or learning video):

H4: The positive relationships between explorative and exploitative learning orientations on deliberate sales learning will be strengthened by preferred learning format.

Figure 1 provides an overview of the hypotheses on which our conceptual framework is built. In the next section, we report the results of an empirical assessment of our conceptual framework.

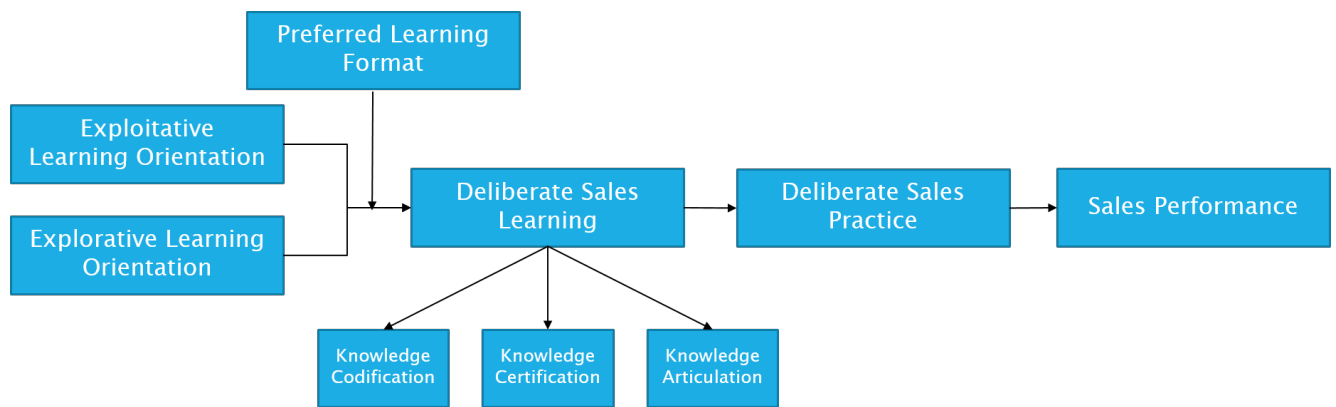


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

Empirical study

We study an FT100 global company operating in the high-tech space. The company runs an enablement program for their channel partners as part of their channel management strategy. Individuals within each channel partner can participate in the program, which is designed to deliberately enhance individual knowledge and skills in sales and thereby boost sales revenues. Each individual in the program on average sells 5.9 times more products than those individuals who work for non-member companies, and this increases by 8 times if they have undertaken incentivized learning. The program offers learning modules and certifications (for individuals), with a total of 160.4K modules completed in the year of study. Certifications are achieved through successful completion of 8-12 modules. Learning data was recorded over a 12-month period. Points are earned for taking modules and point bonuses are awarded for certifications. Points could be redeemed against a range of rewards, including vouchers, electronic merchandise, travel merchandise and homewares amongst others. Digital badges are also awarded that can be posted on social media, websites etc. Points also enable access to the specialist sales team for business development support and invitation to recognition events for member companies.

All individuals (N= 4627) in the enablement program were contacted through a regular annual online survey. Three waves of e-mail invitations were undertaken: one invitation and two reminders (15.25%, 15.10% and 17.22% open rate of e-mails respectively). The survey was open over a two-week period. In total, 383 individuals responded (8.23% response rate). Tier credits were awarded for their participation. This response rate was commensurate with previous annual channel partner surveys that the company had run.

Measures

All measures asked participants to focus on their own approach to sales and sales performance. The items for each scale are presented in table 1.

Exploitative Learning Orientation and Explorative Learning Orientation were measured as reflective scales using 3 items each, adapted for context from Atuahene-Gima and Murray (2007), on a Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

Scale	AVE & CR		Items	CFA	SEM	Mean (s.d.)*
Exploitative Learning Orientation (Atuahene-Gima and Murray 2007)	AVE=61.28%		1. I commonly search for knowledge related to selling existing offerings	.807	.807	4.04 (.75)
	CR=0.83		2. I use knowledge for updates on current sales positions	.732	.733	
			3. I prefer to learn about proven methods for solving sales challenges	.840	.839	
Explorative Learning Orientation (Atuahene-Gima and Murray 2007)	AVE=68.89%		1. I prefer to learn about selling in new markets and technology areas	.839	.838	4.40 (.60)
	CR=0.87		2. I commonly look for novel information and ideas beyond my current experience	.864	.865	
			3. I prefer to experiment with new approaches to sales challenges	.804	.804	
Deliberate Sales Learning (Ye et al. 2010)	Second-Order AVE=85.26% CR=0.95	<i>First-Order</i> AVE=78.86% CR=0.92	Knowledge codification	.930	.932	11.51 (2.40)
			1. I develop alternative approaches to improve sales performance	[.893] [.887] [.884]	[.893] [.887] [.884]	
			2. I create systematic changes to enhance sales performance			
			3. I adopt different routines to achieve the best sales performance			
		AVE=76.67% CR=0.91	Knowledge certification (new scale)	.931	.929	
			1. I use certification trajectories to improve sales performance	[.880] [.899] [.847]	[.880] [.899] [.847]	
		2. I engage with certification trajectories as a comprehensive approach to sales performance				
		3. I rely on the results of certification to benchmark sales performance				
		AVE=82.41% CR=0.93	Knowledge Articulation	.909	.907	
			1. I discuss ways of improving sales performance	[.889] [.926] [.908]	[.889] [.927] [.908]	
			2. I share ideas on how to improve sales performance			
			3. I brief colleagues on how to effectively improve sales performance			
Deliberate Sales Practice	AVE=63.03%		1. I adapt my sales practice to better cater to the needs of new offerings	.911	.911	4.05 (0.87)
	CR=0.94		2. I adapt my sales practice to make sure that XXX products and services meet the needs of our customers	.934	.934	
			3. I adapt my sales practice based on critical reflections on developments in our markets	.905	.905	

*Means and standard deviations are for summated scores/number of items

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics, CFA Loadings, AVEs and CRs for multi-item scales

Deliberate Sales Learning was measured as a second-order construct, based on three first order subscales (each with three items rated from 1-never to 5-very frequently). This is defined as a Type 1 factor structure (Reflective First-Order: Reflection Second Order; Jarvis et al., 2003), consistent with decision rules for determining between reflective and formative constructs. Two of these subscales were adapted from Ye et al. (2012) (Knowledge Articulation; Knowledge Codification). We developed a third subscale to measure Knowledge Certification, given its specific relevance to channel partner enablement. In developing our items, we noted that Kalyanam and Brar (2009) and Ilkay and Aslan (2012) demonstrate that investments in knowledge certification impact on sales performance by channel partners. Partly this is attributed to the fact that a certification structure more effectively engages individuals in developing their ability to be successful in selling a wider, more comprehensive range of products and services, enabling considerable breadth and depth of expertise. Also, Kalyanam and Brar (2009) report that a central building block of developing a value-based channel management strategy is to introduce requirements for meeting minimum customer satisfaction and trust targets to maintaining certification levels, as a benchmark in governing sales performance across channel partners. The importance of knowledge certification for benchmarking in marketing channels is corroborated by Modi and Mabert (2007) who argue that certification is recognized as an effective means of communicating how channel partners signal that they meet suppliers' expected performance levels. We tested the 9 items in a pilot study, with 267 individuals enrolled in the enablement program of a different FT100 global company. As the three dimensions of Deliberate Sales Learning (Knowledge Articulation, Knowledge Codification, and Knowledge Certification) were expected to be correlated, second-order factors should be explored as they provide a better generalization than the first-order factors (Gorsuch, 1990). An exploratory second-order factor analysis of the 9 items was undertaken, using IBM SPSS v.25. Three first-order

factors were extracted using Principle Axis Factoring and obliquely rotated using the PROMAX procedure ($\kappa=4$). Salient pattern coefficients indicated that the first factor corresponded to Knowledge Certification, the second factor to Knowledge Articulation and the third factor to Knowledge Codification. The factors were correlated ($r_{1,2}=0.561$; $r_{1,3}=0.526$; $r_{2,3}=0.550$). A second-order factor analysis of the inter-factor correlation matrix extracted one factor and the Schmid-Leiman solution (Wolff & Preising, 2005) was applied to aid interpretation (table 2). Although, as expected, some unique variance accounted for by the first-order factors is not captured by the second-order factor, Deliberative Sales Learning, is indicated as a viable higher-order factor, accounting for 57% of the variance (above the recommended threshold; Gorsuch, 1990), with meaningful contributions from all the first-order items (ranging from 0.497-0.666).

Item	Deliberative Sales Learning	Knowledge Certification	Knowledge Articulation	Knowledge Codification	H ² total	H ² 2nd	H ² 1st
KCod1	.683	0.016	0.057	0.578	0.805	0.467	0.338
KCod2	.582	-0.109	0.070	0.596	0.711	0.339	0.372
KCod3	.652	0.231	-0.095	0.498	0.736	0.425	0.311
KCert1	.683	0.495	0.151	-0.028	0.735	0.467	0.269
KCert2	.640	0.606	-0.079	0.077	0.789	0.409	0.379
KCert3	.600	0.570	0.017	-0.033	0.686	0.360	0.326
KArt1	.680	0.208	0.488	-0.120	0.757	0.462	0.295
KArt2	.694	-0.071	0.556	0.106	0.807	0.482	0.326
KArt3	.718	-0.031	0.583	0.058	0.860	0.516	0.344

Table 2: Schmid-Leiman Solution (SLS) for Exploratory Second-Order Factor Analysis – Deliberative Sales Learning

We developed a 3-item scale to measure Deliberate Sales Practice (1=never – 5 very frequently). Three items were developed focused on the three key areas of market information, customer needs and innovative offerings identified by Simpson et al. (2001) and Modi and Mabert (2007). In many supply chains, firms enable their channel partners to practice the attainment of profitable value and display norms and behavior in reference to responsiveness to market information, customer needs and innovative offerings (Simpson et

al. 2001). In the domain of sales practice, this means focusing on engaging with strategic and operational information about new offerings, feedback on customer needs and competitive pressures in the market place (Modi & Mabert, 2007) that attain the best possible results and separate from ‘actual work activities’ (Ericsson 2009, p. 420).

Preferred Learning Format was captured with a single item, where participants indicated their preferred format from a list of the three available options (power-point based webinars; interactive modules; short-format videos). Case matched Sales Performance data (in USD) was provided by the company.

Analysis

We used IBM SPSS AMOS v.25 to conduct the analysis. We followed Byrne (2016) in our data screening for SEM in AMOS, with specific reference to multivariate outliers and kurtosis, and did not find any specific concerns. First, a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was conducted to assess the measurement model for the four multi-item reflective scales: Exploitative Learning Orientation; Explorative Learning Orientation; Deliberate Sales Learning; Deliberate Sales Practice. Deliberate Sales Learning was modelled as a second order construct, composed of three first order factors: Knowledge Articulation; Knowledge Codification; Knowledge Certification. The model fit statistics were all at acceptable levels (see table 3), following guidelines based on the number of observed variables (18) and the sample size (383) (Hair et al., 2019). Further, the measurement model for all scales was supported in terms of reliability and validity. That is, all factor loadings were significant and greater than 0.7; all standardized residuals were below $|4|$; composite reliabilities were above 0.7; Average Variance Extracted (AVEs) above 50% for all scales. In the case of Deliberative Sales Learning, this held for both the first-order and second-order structures

(MacKenzie et al., 2011) - see table 1. We concluded that the measurement model was supported.

The structural model was then assessed. We first tested the model without the Sales Performance data to ensure consistency with the CFA model. We then went on to test the mediation model with the addition of the observed Sales Performance data (to test H1, H2 and H3). For initial comparison purposes, the model fit statistics were acceptable in both cases and, were consistent with that of the CFA (see table 3), all standardized residuals were below $|4|$ with no systematic patterns evident (Hair et al., 2019). To test mediation we followed the process outlined by Hair et al. (2019), and consistent with Zhao et al. (2010), incorporating a comparative test of the mediated model against (i) the mediation plus direct relationship model for exploitative learning orientation, and, (ii) the mediation plus direct relationship model for explorative learning orientation.

	CFA	SEM	SEM + Sales Mediation Only	Mediation plus Exploitative Learning Orientation	Mediation plus Explorative Learning Orientation
Chi-squared (d.f., p), CMIN/df	371.595 (126, p=0.000), 2.95	372.401 (128, p=0.000), 2.91	413.665 (145, p=0.000), 2.853	412.878 (144, p=0.000) 2.867	13.887 (144, p=0.000), 2.776
Change (delta) in Chi-squared (d.f., p)				.787 (1, n.s.)	13.887 (1, 0.01)
RMSEA (90% CI)	0.071 (.063-.080)	.071 (.062-.079)	.070 (.062-.078)	.070 (.062-.078)	.068 (.060-.076)
NFI, CFI	.943, .962	.943, .962	.937, .958	.938, .958	.940, .960

Table 3: Model Fit Statistics for CFA and SEM Comparative Models

We went on to test H4, that is, the moderation of Preferred Learning Format on the relationships between Exploitative/Explorative Learning Orientation and Deliberate Sales Learning using a multi-group comparison analysis (Hair et al., 2019). The 3 levels of the moderator were identified as group 1 (power-point based webinars), group 2 (interactive

module) and group 3 (short format videos). Factor loadings for the scales for each group are presented in table 4, metric equivalence across the three groups was just achieved (table 5), and all standardized residuals were below $|4|$.

Scale	Item/Subscale	PPT-based Webinars	Interactive Modules	Short-Format Videos
Exploitative Learning Orientation	1. I commonly search for knowledge related to selling existing offerings	.595	.752	.838
	2. I use knowledge for updates on current sales positions	.683	.696	.696
	3. I prefer to learn about proven methods for solving sales challenges	.864	.839	.797
Explorative Learning Orientation	1. I prefer to learn about selling in new markets and technology areas	.846	.789	.746
	2. I commonly look for novel information and ideas beyond my current experience	.884	.868	.784
	3. I prefer to experiment with new approaches to sales challenges	.847	.756	.644
Deliberate Sales Learning	Knowledge Codification	.801	.919	.917
	Knowledge Certification	.930	.800	.952
	Knowledge Articulation	.894	.939	.890
Deliberate Sales Practice	1. I adapt my sales practice to better cater to the needs of new offerings	.892	.822	.901
	2. I adapt my sales practice to make sure that XXX products and services meet the needs of our customers	.960	.882	.902
	3. I adapt my sales practice based on critical reflections on developments in our markets	.892	.889	.852

Table 4: Factor loadings for three-group moderation

Findings

For our hypothesized mediation-only model all of our hypotheses are supported (figure 2).

There is a positive relationship between both Explorative Learning Orientation (H1) and

Explorative Learning Orientation (H2) and Deliberate Sales Learning. Although, the relationship between Exploitative Learning Orientation and Deliberate Sales learning is stronger ($\beta=.555$ versus $\beta=.176$). There is also good evidence to support H3, where there is a strong positive relationship between Deliberate Sales Learning and Deliberative Sales Practice, and between Deliberative Sales Practice and Sales Performance.

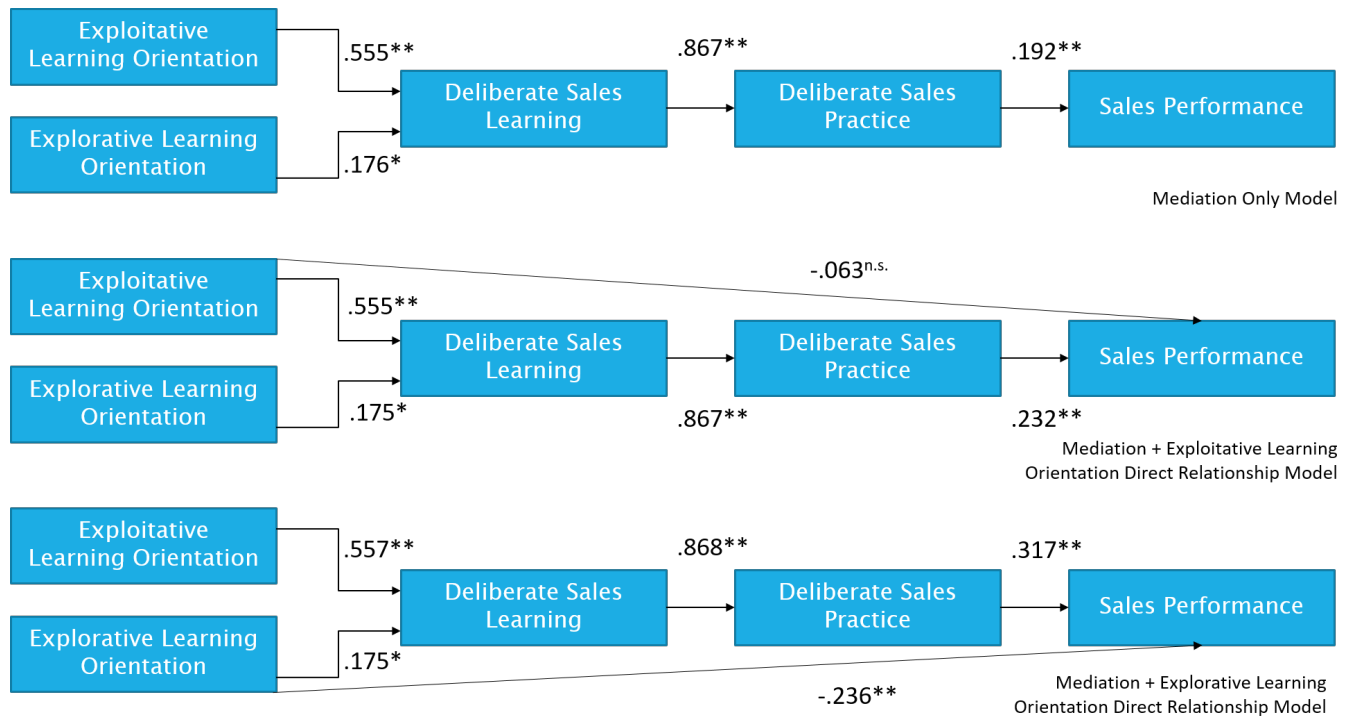
Mediation Analysis

Investigating our proposed relationships in more detail, following Hair et al. (2019), we set out to compare our hypothesized mediation model against those specifying a direct relationship between (i) exploitative learning orientation and sales performance and (ii) explorative learning orientation and sales performance. The comparative results of the SEM testing H1, H2 and H3 are presented in figure 2 and table 3.

When the direct relationship between exploitative learning orientation and sales performance was added to the model, there was a slight change in chi-squared but this was not significant. Further, we see no value gain in the model fit statistics (table 3) and the mediation path estimates remain significant and largely unchanged (figure 2). This indicates that our complete mediation path is supported.

When the direct relationship between explorative learning orientation and sales performance was added to the model, this new path was negative and significant and there was a corresponding significant change in chi-squared. Although, there are very marginal gains in the model fit statistics (table 3). We note that the mediation path estimates remain significant and largely unchanged, apart from an improved estimate between deliberative sales practice and sales performance (figure 2). This indicates that whilst our complete mediation path is not supported, there is support for partial mediation. The nature of this partial mediation is that there is a negative direct path and a positive mediation path between

exploitative learning orientation and sales performance. This would be classified as ‘competitive mediation’ according to Zhao et al. (2010). We explore the meaning of this competitive mediation in our discussion section.



* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.001$

Figure 2: Mediation Model Results

Moderator Analysis

Comparison of the structural models between the three groups, based on Preferred Learning Format (PowerPoint-based webinars; interactive modules; short-form videos), indicated that there were significant differences between the groups supporting moderation and, hence, H4 (table 5). The regression weights for the pathway from the Learning Orientations to Deliberate Sales Learning are presented in table 6.

	CMIN	df	p	CMIN/df	CFI	RMSEA	delta	Delta CMIN	p
Unconstrained	825.622	435	.000	1.898	.927	.049 (.044-.054)			
Metric Equivalence	862.450	459	.000	1.879	.924	.048 (.043-.053)	36.828	24	0.046
Moderation	878.814	463	.000	1.898	.922	.049 (.044-.053)	53.193	28	0.003
Metric versus moderation							16.365	4	.003

Table 5: Model comparisons for moderator at 3 levels

	Regression Weight		Beta		p	
	Explorative LO	Exploitative LO	Explorative LO	Exploitative LO	Explorative LO	Exploitative LO
PPT-based Webinar	-.162	.622	-.155	.409	.578	.167
Interactive Module	.328	.294	.309	.390	.005	.000
Short-Form Video	.379	.591	.209	.545	.045	.000

Table 6: Regression weights for the relationship between explorative/exploitative learning orientation and deliberate sales learning for the 3 group moderation

Considering the relationship from Explorative Learning Orientation to Deliberate Sales Learning: for those with a preference for PPT-based webinars this relationship was negative and non-significant; for those with a preference for interactive modules or short-form videos the relationship was positive and significant. However, those with a preference for interactive modules had the strongest moderation effect.

Considering the relationship between Exploitative Learning Orientation to Deliberate Sales Learning: for those with a preference for PPT-based webinars the relationship was positive but non-significant; for those with a preference for interactive modules or short form videos, the relationship was positive and significant. Although, for this pathway the strongest moderation was for those with a preference for short-form videos.

General Discussion

Although the impact of different schools of thought in organizational learning has been well documented (Bell et al., 2002), important gaps in our understanding remain. These relate to its conceptualization, potential impact, and boundary conditions of organizational learning within the context of strategic enablement of channel partners and its relationship to sales performance. By addressing these gaps, the current study contributes to the strategic enablement literature in business markets in several ways. First, on the basis of an extensive literature review, we conceptualize the phenomenon of deliberate sales learning by channel partners, as consisting of three underlying dimensions; knowledge articulation, knowledge codification and knowledge certification. In developing this notion of channel partner learning, we expand the deliberate learning concept beyond the organization to the vertical distribution network to capture the nature of learning in relation to indirect sales strategies. Extending key research (Zollo & Winter, 2002) in this area, our study not only offers a broader conceptualization, it also facilitates more comprehensive insights of self-directed learning by channel partners based on important contingencies. Deliberative sales learning as developed here is better aligned to contemporary developments in strategic sales enablement in which channel partners are engaged as active partners in shaping their learning and development of sales knowledge and skills.

Second, and to the best of our knowledge, our study is the first to position channel partner deliberate sales learning within a framework aimed at accounting for sales performance. We conceptualize and demonstrate that, while, what could be termed ambidextrous, learning orientations uniquely shape deliberate sales learning by channel partners, the impact of exploitative learning is considerably more pronounced. In addition, our model unveils that these orientations influence sales performance through a process of sequential mediation. That is, deliberate sales learning informs deliberate sales practice

across three strategic sales enablement areas, such as knowledge on how to sell new product offerings, understand customer needs and reflect on developments in markets. In turn, we demonstrate that deliberate sales practice predicts actual sales performance of channel partners, confirming that these associates both have to cognitively and behaviorally engage with knowledge and skills acquisition.

Yet we also uncover an important distinction between the action of the two learning orientations. The relationship between exploitative learning orientation on sales performance is fully mediated, which is fully aligned with the focus of this learning orientation on improving current knowledge. However, the relationship between explorative learning orientation on sales performance is through competitive mediation. That is, a positive partial mediation path competes with a negative direct relationship. A clue to the origins of these competitive paths lies in the nature of explorative learning orientation as a preference for knowledge and skills that depart from the status quo. That is, on one hand, explorative learning orientation may perforce lead learners to explore avenues that may depart from activities solely related to sales performance, possibly even reducing performance in favor of other outcomes (e.g., enhancing technical knowledge outside of key sales areas). On the other hand, and in parallel, deliberative sales learning necessarily focuses on activities related to sales performance and so specifically channeling efforts towards key sales areas.

Third, a variety of teaching formats are on offer in channel enablement programs. At the same time there is a paucity of evidence on preferences of learners between traditional and novel learning formats in channel partner enablement. We examine the impact of learning format preference in conjunction with the effect of the two ambidextrous learning orientations on deliberate learning by channel partners. The results provide empirical evidence of the fact that a preference for an interactive learning format strengthens the relatively weak relationship between explorative learning orientation and deliberate sales

learning. This signifies that a preference for novel didactic formats enables knowledge acquisitions by those channel partners who are interested in engaging with novel content for developing new sales knowledge and skills. This is possibly reflective of the need to ‘depart’ from the norm for this orientation.

Future research implications

As with any research study, there are limitations that offer starting points for future research on strategic enablement in channels. First, in our study we conduct a survey and collected channel partner performance data within the IT industry. Further evidence could still improve the generalizability and validity of our findings. Therefore, we call for additional research to validate our findings using samples drawn from channel partners in varied distribution network contexts to further ascertain and corroborate our findings. We particularly encourage further study of the competitive mediation indicated here between explorative learning orientation and sales performance.

Second, to establish its uniqueness and relevance to the strategic enablement, we broadened the notion of deliberate sales learning to include knowledge certification. In order to provide additional support for the conceptual distinctiveness and factor structure of our concept of deliberate sales learning, we invite future research to examine deliberate sales learning taking a number of specific contingencies of the indirect sales channel into account, such as preferred channel partner and status badging, as well as sales level agreements (SLAs) that further tap into the certification of channel partners.

Third, our study’s cross-sectional design prevents us from drawing causal inferences about the causality (e.g., the occurrence of feedback loops and deliberate learning dimensions) and interrelatedness between deliberate learning at different levels beyond the individual level (e.g., sales teams, distributors vs. specialized channel partners). Continued

research is needed to approach channel partner learning across multiple level perspectives by adopting a longitudinal approach to further explore strategic enablement by channel partners and take into account that learning is a reciprocal and iterative process.

Finally, while we demonstrate that channel partner preference for learning format is a significant boundary condition, little is known on what determines these preferences. We acknowledge that it is important to further investigate whether factors such as different learning styles (e.g., visual vs verbal learning) and even personality traits can often a more in-depth understanding of this aspect of strategic enablement. It is also important to remember that as digital technology develops (de Ruyter et al., 2018), other technology preferences will need to be taken into account. Conversely, different types of learning content will need to be taken into account and future research should assess the relative impact of, for instance, corporate social responsibility-related learning material and the emerging imperative to take climate change and general sustainability issues into account in formulating a sales channel strategy (Benos et al., 2018; Hensen et al., 2016).

Managerial implications

This study focuses on the under-studied phenomenon of strategic sales enablement in channels through deliberate sales learning. Based on our results, there are a number of pertinent implications for managerial practice to be drawn. To begin with, our results reveal robust evidence of the impact of channel partner learning on sales performance. Given the fact that strategic enablement programs require substantial investment on the part of suppliers, it is important to be able to make a solid business case for ROI on learning. Our study offers a practical blueprint for the way in which this can be established in a number of ways. First, our context-specific delineation of deliberate sales learning and practice offer a useful way of diagnosing by suppliers as it offers a common understanding of what learning

activities and applications are undertaken by channel partners when it comes to selling and the content can be readily linked back to sales performance. Second, this offers checks and balances for learning content developers and invites them to adopt a learner-oriented perspective. The offering here of context relevant measurement scales for deliberate sales learning and practice enables ready assessment of the constructs. Third, our model identifies specific mechanisms through which the impact of enablement programs can be enhanced. This further allows suppliers to develop and conduct intervention strategies, identifying knowledge domains that need to be targeted with learning content to boost sales performance in an effective manner. Fourth, obtaining detailed data on deliberate sales learning and practice may guide investment allocation toward learn activities (e.g., developing business cases or risk registers) and assist with performance monitoring and feedback provision. Incentive structures can be tailored to encourage specific learning activities and emphasize effective deliberate sales practice.

In addition, our study also delineates motivations that can be used to explain why channel partners would actively engage in self-directed learning. The evolution of digital online learning platforms now allows suppliers to quickly deploy learning interactions across multiple geographies and markets cost-effectively and has now become a quick go-to-market to enable channel partners. Since, both explorative and exploitative orientations contribute to deliberate sales learning, managers may need to balance these in developing knowledge and skills capacity in the distribution channel. By leveraging our measurement scale, suppliers can frame their communications aimed at promoting learning opportunities within an enablement strategy and tailor them to different tendency to engage with deliberate sales learning. Managing explorative learning orientations may be particularly pertinent. Moreover, our study offers insights into how to scaffold-match channel partners with a preference for interactive learning with online modules to meet their needs to explore new knowledge and

skills when it comes to selling. Achieving a fit between learning orientation and content delivery mode is an effective way of increasing the reach and impact of deliberate sales learning. Given their importance to the successful performance of channel partners, and taking a public policy point of view, government policies could be directed at stimulating the deliberate sales learning capabilities of small and medium-sized firms in distribution networks and for sales legislative compliance (e.g., anti bribery).

Promoting and enabling knowledge articulation, codification and certification could support channel partners in adding value to their channel relationships. An important take-away from our results is that it is important that channel partners reflect on how they can use their learning purposively. Encouraging salespeople to reflect on the knowledge and skills they have acquired assists them in comprehending the relevance of learning content to their role. In order to further reflection and reinforce the value of deliberate sales learning, we recommend that suppliers include review and rating systems of learning content to prompt learners to evaluate what they have learned. These can be directed at reflecting on individual models or certification tracks. Additionally, many learning management systems offer the possibility of installing an online learner community. In these spaces, channel partners can share both sales and learning experiences to nurture reflections on the value of strategic sales enablement. Finally, suppliers should emphasize the relevance of learning content to areas of channel partner practice and offer information of what steps partners can take to put their learning into action. For instance, by incorporating specific calls to action that offer a stepwise implementation scheme for learning content and include links to additional sources of information and other learning content.

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