Helping colleagues with the sale of innovations: does it harm or benefit salesperson’s own performance?
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Published in:

Published: 01/01/2015

Document Version
Publisher’s PDF, also known as Version of Record (includes final page, issue and volume numbers)

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Research Question
While helping colleagues may be beneficial for the performance of the sales unit as a whole (e.g., Ahearne et al. 2010), research indicates that it may come at the expense of the individual helper’s own task performance (Barnes et al. 2008); allocating too much time and energy to helping colleagues generally leads to neglecting individuals’ own task accomplishment.

Therefore, the focal research question of this study is to examine how individual salespersons can effectively combine helping colleagues with proactive task-related selling with and make effective trade-offs between helping and meeting own sales performance targets.

Method and Data
We tested our framework and hypotheses using data of a large information and communications technology (ICT) company selling its products to the top 500 companies in Europe. The company’s product portfolio consisted of ICT products, such as workspace management systems, connectivity solutions, and datacenters. During the time of study the company introduced several new, cloud-based solutions that indicated a break with the existing solutions and required changes in customer work processes (Johnson et al. 2014) and created a new task buy context for customers (e.g., Yahoo abandoned cloud-based solutions; cnn.com). The complexity of the sales process meant that a sale could take several months to complete. The focus on the sales units of a single firm helped control for many confounding effects such as industry type, differences in reward structures, and support resources.

Data were collected from two sources. First, salesperson data were collected using a survey. This rendered data of 211 sales persons organized in 31 units (response rate = 73%). Second, we obtained each individual salesperson’s sales results from company records for the 6-month period following the survey data collection.

Finally, we analyzed the data in two successive stages. First, the descriptives were studied, and exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses performed. Second, we conducted multilevel regression analyses to test our hypotheses.

Key Contributions
We contribute to the literature in two important ways. First, we contribute to the extant research base by investigating how individual salespersons can combine the social activity of helping, which is one of the most powerful pro-social or organizational citizen behaviors (Podsakoff et al. 2000) with proactive selling, which is the most potent task-related behavior (cf. Pitt et al. 2002). According to sociotechnical systems theory (Kelly 1978; Pasmore et al. 1982; Trist and Bamforth 1951; Trist, Higgin, Murray, and Pollack 1963), the most effective organizations (or units) are those where the social and task-related systems are integrated (Emery, 1959). Research on frontline work unit and team effectiveness has indeed confirmed the importance of both task and social processes as drivers of sales performance (Ahearne et al. 2010a;
Second, while several studies have examined the role of contingencies at the sales unit level (Ahearne et al. 2010a), few studies have considered these contingencies for individual salespersons operating in unit-based settings. This is remarkable, because in sales settings individual-based performance targets rather than unit- or team-based targets still dominate. Therefore, we contribute to current research by considering two important moderators: sales unit diversity in member’s sales experience and individual salesperson task autonomy.

First, recent work on serial entrepreneurs shows that prior experience with innovations can effectively leverage future innovations (Griffin et al. 2007). We expect that this effect of experience will also hold for the activity of selling innovations. Second, by offering task autonomy, individuals become empowered and can make their own decisions, which is particularly important in front-line settings where local knowledge is key to optimal decision outcomes.

**Summary of Findings**

Our finding reveal that helping colleagues does not always harm but can even benefit salespeople’s own innovation selling performance if (1) salespeople combine their helping behavior with high proactive selling efforts, and (2) if they operate in a sales unit with a high level of diversity in sales experience. The results also suggest that diversity in sales experience in the unit can compensate for low levels of proactive selling because the sharing of experience makes low proactive sellers more effective.

*References are available on request.*