

Optimizing Salesperson Performance: A Flow Theory Perspective

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A sample of 125 salespeople from 13 countries was surveyed to assess the effects of flow on salesperson performance. Salespeople achieve the flow state when their skills match the challenges of the sales situation, and the challenge/skill balance is high. Exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses followed by a cluster analysis indicated that there was a significant difference in sales performance among salespeople with different levels of the flow state. The article concludes with managerial implications and directions for future research.

Keywords: flow, salesperson performance, challenge-skill balance

INTRODUCTION

The determinants of salesperson performance continue to intrigue researchers (e.g., Munyon, Frieder, Satornino, Carnes, Bolander, and Ferris, 2021; Bolander, Satornino, Allen, Hochstein, and Dugan, 2020; Westbrook, and Peterson, 2022; Good, Hughes, Kirca, and McGrath, 2022; Bolander, Chaker, Pappas, Bradbury, 2021). The research interest in salesperson performance is understandable since firms cannot survive and prosper without sales revenues. The current study adds to this growing body of literature by exploring the role of positive psychology in salesperson performance.

Past studies have primarily used expectancy theory, self-determination theory, and attribution theory as the theoretical underpinnings of salespeople's motivation to become high performers (Khusainova, Jong, Lee, Marshall, and Rudd, 2018). Based on Expectancy theory (Vroom, 1964), performance will depend on salespersons' belief on the effort-performance-reward relationship. In Self-determination theory (Deci and Ryan, 1985), performance will depend on the degree to which salespeople's need for competence, autonomy, and relatedness is satisfied. In contrast, Attribution theory (Heider, 1958) argued that performance will depend on the causal attributions of outcomes. This study contributes to the understanding salesperson performance by focusing on positive psychology.

Salespeople may become happy or sad, anxious, or relaxed, interested or bored during customer-salesperson interactions. Each sales call experience has the potential to contribute positively or negatively to salespeople's psychological well-being. Positive customer-salesperson experiences will broaden the salespersons' thought-action repertoires and make them more resilient to the challenges of selling situations. Based on the broaden-and-build theory (Fredrickson, 2001) the physical, intellectual, social and psychological resources of salespeople induced by positive emotions are likely improve salesperson

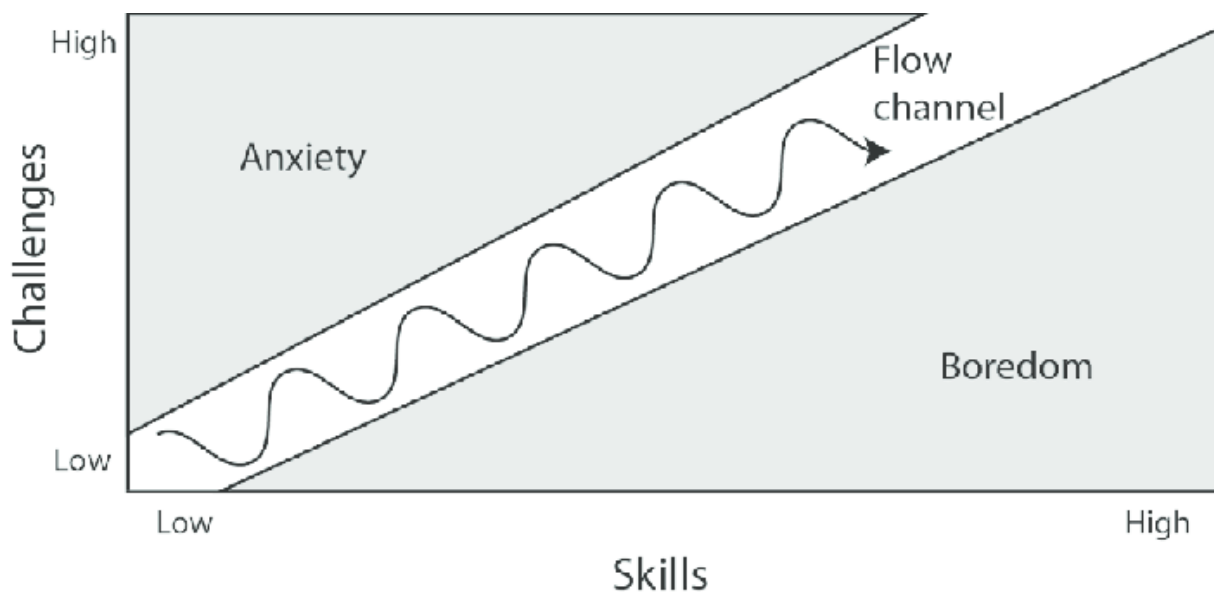
performance. The purpose of this study is to examine the role of positive psychology on salesperson performance.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Moneta and Csikszentmihalyi (1996, p. 277) defined flow as “a psychological state in which the person feels simultaneously cognitively efficient, motivated, and happy.” Based on thousands of interviews, Csikszentmihalyi (1990) conceptualized flow as consisting of nine activities, namely, skill-challenge balance, clear goals, clear and immediate feedback, concentration, a merging of action and awareness, a sense of control, a feeling that the activity is intrinsically rewarding, loss of self-consciousness, and transformation of time. Sales calls allow salespeople to experience all of these activities. For example, salespeople learn the skills to face the challenges of selling. The selling firm sets clear goals for them, and during a sales call, a salesperson should concentrate and decipher the verbal and non-verbal feedback from customers to be successful. Intrinsically motivated salespeople will become highly involved in customer interactions and successfully access the correct selling strategies automatically from their declarative and procedural knowledge. They are likely to enjoy their work and feel that hours seem to pass by like minutes. In sum, salespeople can experience flow.

The following figure represents how Csikszentmihalyi (1990) visualized the relationships between challenges and skills.

FIGURE 1
CHANGE-SKILL BALANCE



To summarize, an individual perceives an optimal experience when his/her skills match the challenges of his/her tasks. They achieve the state of flow when the task itself becomes the reward for success and they are intrinsically motivated to be absorbed in the task and enjoy it immensely. Imbalanced challenge/skill balance might result in less than optimal outcome. For example, when challenges exceed skills, anxiety sets in. Excess skills compared to challenges results in boredom. However, when challenges match skills and they are both at high levels, the flow state occurs.

The sales literature is dormant on the role of flow on sales performance. Sridhar and Lyngdoh (2019) did study the role of the effects of flow on salespeople. However, their study focused on ethical selling

behaviors, not sales performance. The current study attempts to fill this gap in the sales literature by empirically examining the effects of flow on sales performance in multiple countries.

METHODOLOGY

In order to ascertain the global implications of salespeople’s flow, a random sample of 2000 international salespeople were purchased from a database firm in UK. An email survey was sent to these salespeople. The questionnaire included measures of flow, challenge/skill balance, sales performance, and relevant demographics. The respondents also indicated the product and/or service they sold. The measurement scales were adopted from past studies. Flow was measured by the 13-item WOLF scale (Bakker, 2008), which included three dimensions, namely, absorption, work enjoyment, and intrinsic work motivation. The 4 absorption items measured the degree to which salespeople were fully absorbed in their customer interactions. The 4 items measuring work enjoyment indicated the degree to which salespeople enjoyed their work. Finally, 5 items measured salespeople’s intrinsic work motivation. The 3-item challenge/skill balance scale (Quinn, 2005) was used to measure salespeople’s perception of the degree to which they were skilled to face the challenges of selling. Further, sales performance was measured by the 7-item “sales objectives” dimension of the 31-item sales performance scale developed by Behrman and Perreault (1982). Respondents used a 5-point likert scale (1 = strongly disagree.....5 = strongly agree) to indicate their responses. The items are displayed in the Appendix.

The initial survey and a follow-up email yielded only 82 usable responses. Budget constraints prohibited incentivizing the survey. Since this sample size reflected only a 4.1% response rate, the first author attended an International Neuroscience conference in Italy and solicited participants to collect data. This attempt yielded 43 additional responses bringing the total sample size to 125. The data analysis was conducted on these 125 responses. On average, the respondents were 48 years old and had 21 years of selling experience. Table 1 displays the respondent profile.

**TABLE 1
RESPONDENT PROFILE**

		Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	104	83.2%
	Female	21	16.8%
Education	Vocational Degree	11	8.8%
	High School Diploma	30	24%
	Bachelors	44	35.2%
	Masters	23	18.4%
	Doctorate	4	3.2%
	Other	13	10.4%
Product	Goods	86	68.8%
	Services	33	26.4%
Location	United Kingdom	41	32.8%
	Germany	27	21.6%
	Denmark	14	11.2%
	Sweden	6	4.8%
	Switzerland	5	4%
	Netherlands	4	3.2%
	Belgium	3	2.4%
	Poland	3	2.4%

United States	3	2.4%
India	3	2.4%
Ireland	2	1.6%
Spain	2	1.6%
Turkey	2	1.6%
Argentina	1	0.8%
Australia	1	0.8%
Austria	1	0.8%
Brazil	1	0.8%
Bulgaria	1	0.8%
Finland	1	0.8%
Iraq	1	0.8%
Jordan	1	0.8%
Kuwait	1	0.8%
Sri Lanka	1	0.8%

ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

A comparison of early and late respondents showed no significant difference on the study variables (Armstrong, and Overton, 1977). Thus, non-response bias was unlikely to affect the study. The reliability of each scale was assessed using Cronbach's α . The reliability of the intrinsic work motivation scale and the challenge/skill balance scale was less than 0.60 (see appendix). One item measuring each of intrinsic work motivation and challenge/skill balance were deleted due to low item-to-total correlations. The remaining 21 items were retained for confirmatory factor analyses.

The measurement properties of the latent constructs (except challenge/skill balance, which had only two items) were assessed by confirmatory factor analyses. Barring absorption, the fit statistics of the measurement models were satisfactory. The CFI and RMSEA values were 0.99 and 0.05 for enjoyment, 0.95 and 0.13 for intrinsic work motivation, 0.88 and 0.24 for absorption, and 0.91 and 0.12 for sales performance, respectively.

For each respondent, a flow score was computed by combining their responses to absorption, work enjoyment, and intrinsic work motivation. A hierarchical cluster analysis of the flow scores yielded two clusters which differed significantly in the levels of flow. The sales performance of each respondent was calculated as an average of the seven sales performance items. Thereafter, an ANOVA was conducted to assess the difference in sales performance between the two clusters. The results revealed a statistically significant difference in sales performance between the two clusters ($t = -5.825$, $p < 0.001$). The mean sales performance score of cluster 1 (3.47) was significantly less than that of cluster 2 (4.09). The 95% confidence interval of Cohen's d (point estimate = -1.09) did not include zero. Thus, salespeople in a higher flow state outperformed their lower flow state counterparts. The results are displayed in Table 2.

TABLE 2
ANOVA RESULTS

	MEAN	F _{1,124}	SIGNIFICANCE
CLUSTER 1 (N = 40)	3.15	185.75	P<0.001
CLUSTER 2 (N = 85)	4.22		

Salespeople in the two clusters also perceived a statistically significant difference in challenge/skill balance ($t = -5.61$, $p < 0.001$, Cohen's $d = -1.056$, 95% CI (-1.45, -0.66)). An Independent Samples T-test between the two clusters indicated that salespeople in cluster 2 (mean = 4.33) perceived a higher degree of challenge/skill balance than those in cluster 1 (mean = 3.69). This result supports Csikszentmihalyi's (1990)

flow theory in sales contexts. A high level of challenge/skill balance was needed for optimal sales performance.

MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS

To the best of our knowledge, the current study is the first empirical attempt to test Csikszentmihalyi's (1990) flow theory in selling and sales management. The results of this study pose a challenge to sales organizations on optimal territory designs. Territory design decisions have typically followed two approaches, the balancing approach (Zoltners and Sinha, 1983), and the COSTA approach (Skiera and Albers, 1998). While the balancing approach attempts to balance sales territories on workload and potential, the COSTA approach focuses on profit maximization. Neither approaches considered the fluctuations in the positive experience of salespeople while interacting with customers. Based on this study, sales managers should consider allocating territories based on challenge/skill balance. Highly skilled salespeople should be assigned to the most challenging customers. The most commonly used geographic structure in sales organizations may not be maximizing the sales performance in each territory. Since the level of challenges posed by customers will vary within each territory, and the level of skills will vary among salespeople, it will be difficult to implement the benefits of Csikszentmihalyi's (1990) flow theory in sales contexts.

LIMITATIONS

There are two limitations of this study. First, the small sample size may have affected the results. Consequently, the results should be interpreted with caution. Second, salespeople are expected to encounter different levels of challenge during each work day. The measurement of challenge/skill balance should be during each such episodes. Csikszentmihalyi (1990) used the Experience Sampling Method to measure flow. In this method, respondents are signaled (pager) randomly throughout the day and they provide written answers to questions immediately after receiving the signal. This allows researchers to measure the fluctuations in flow at several intervals during a work day. In the current study, the Experience Sampling Method could not be used since salespeople responded from 13 different countries. Their flow experience responses were after the fact. Thus, the results of this study could have been biased due to the manner in which the data were collected.

DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The level of challenge might vary during each sales call with the same customer at various points in the sales presentation. For example, a salesperson may consider handling objections as more challenging than describing the functions of the product or service. Future research can examine the consequences of fluctuations in challenge/skill imbalance during a specific sales call. Future research can also study the consequences of a mismatch between salespeople's skills and the challenges of a selling situations on long term customer-salesperson relationships.

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APPENDIX

The WOLF Scale (Bakker, 2008)

Absorption (Coefficient $\alpha = 0.74$)

When I am working, I think about nothing else.

I get carried away by my work.

When I am working, I forget everything else around me.

I am totally immersed in my work.

Work Enjoyment (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.89$)

My work gives me a good feeling.

I do my work with a lot of enjoyment.

I feel happy during my work.

I feel cheerful when I am working.

Intrinsic Work Motivation (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.59$)

I would still do this work, even if I received less pay.

I find that I also want to work in my free time.

I work because I enjoy it.

When I am working on something, I am doing it for myself.¹

I get my motivation from the work itself, and not from the reward for it.

¹Item deleted based on item-to-total correlations.

Challenge/Skill Balance (Quinn, 2005) (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.54$)

I was challenged, but I believed my skills would allow me to meet the challenge.

My abilities matched the high challenge of the situation.

I felt I was competent enough to meet the high demands of the situation.

Sales Performance (Behrman and Perreault, 1982) (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.81$)

Producing a high market share for your company.

Making sales of those products with the highest profit margin.

Generating a high level of dollar sales.

Quickly generating sales of new company product/services.

Identifying and selling to major accounts.

Producing sales or blanket contracts with long-term profitability.

Exceeding all sales targets and objectives during the year.