Culture's Mediating Role on Global Sales Training

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Over the past three decades myriad research has been conducted in the area of global sales training. The purpose of this study is to review the extant literature to understand what is known and to assess what future global sales management studies are needed to refine our understanding of this area. Global sales training is more sophisticated, firms devote more time planning sales training, programs are linked to firm goals and strategies, and evaluation occurs at multiple levels in comparison to more localized training. However, all global sales training is mediated by cultural influences. Based upon the findings, specific recommendations for future sales research are offered regarding planning, modifying training based upon culture, standardization, and selection of criteria for assessing global sales training.

INTRODUCTION

Three decades ago, sales managers and sales researchers were challenged "to examine certain aspects of sales management from the standpoint of their significance in a cross-cultural framework" (Still 1981, p. 7), since only anecdotal information existed about how to manage a sales force across cultural lines. Specifically, Still (1981) urged sales scholars to broaden their sales management research along cross-cultural and micro-cultural dimensions. More recently, international sales (IS) thought leaders stated:

> "Given that the sales force is primarily responsible for the lion's share of customer acquisition and retention, understanding sales force issues in a global context would seem to be vital for ongoing corporate success" (Baldauf and Lee, 2011, p. 211).

Therefore, after 30 years, possessing a clear understanding of how to manage a global sales force in different cultures remains an important concern for sales firms.

This research extends a recent study, that broadly summarized multiple international sales management areas (Panagopoulos et al. 2011), by focusing more deeply on the important area of global sales force training. Over the previous three decades, a significant number of studies examined different aspects of global sales training. This study reviews the extant literature and synthesizes the findings related to global sales training into useful knowledge for both practicing managers and research propositions for sales management scholars.

The role of culture on assessing, planning, conducting, and evaluating sales training is shown as a mediating variable in Figure 1. The model is explained below and comprises three stages: antecedent, mediating, and consequence variables:

Figure 1
Culture's Mediating Influence on Global Sales Training
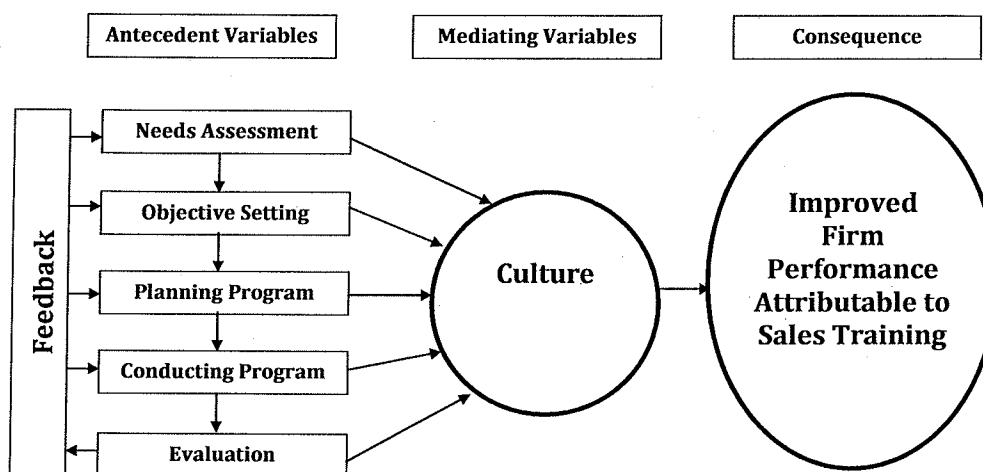
Antecedent variables relate to the quality the sales training program is assessed, planned, conducted, and evaluated. When sales training programs are planned and conducted appropriately there is a greater chance that sales managers will observe higher sales force performance (Pelham 2002). Culture is a *mediating variable* that influences sales managers' perceptions about what should be taught and how knowledge, skills, and attitudes should be transferred (Bond and Smith 1996). Culture also mediates managerial satisfaction with sales training. *Consequence variables* are objective improvements in sales performance that are measured by utilizing ratio data like sales revenue, profitability, retained buyers, or number of buyer complaints (Attia, Honeycutt, and Attia 2002). It is easier to assess consequence variables when sales training objectives are factored into the evaluation and when a company assesses their sales team at the group versus individual level (Cavusgil 1990).

Global Sales Training

The primary goal of sales training is to prepare sales professionals to communicate the benefits of their products or services in order to increase business development through increased sales and profits (Honeycutt, Ford, and Simintiras 2003). Specific sales training programs are developed for trainees "to improve selling skills, help achieve personal goals, foster personal growth, and create excellence in the marketplace" (Yaseen and Khanfar 2009, p. 120). Sales training programs can be divided into three general components as seen in Figure 2: needs analysis, program planning and delivery, and evaluation (Latham and Wexley 1981).

Figure 2
Sales Training Process
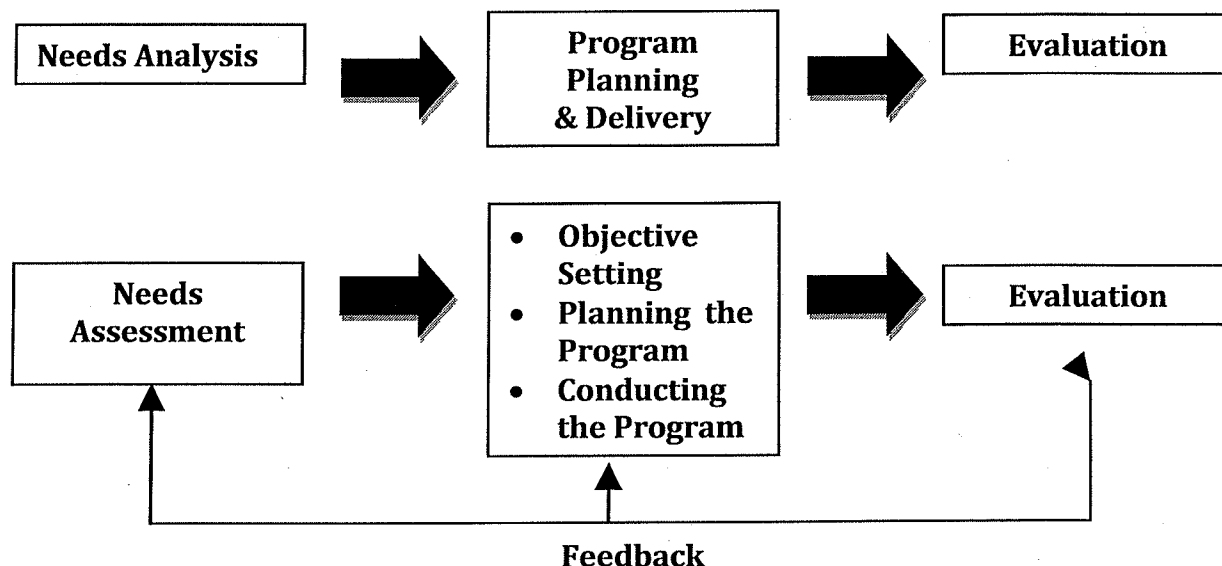
Needs Analysis

Assessment of training needs seeks to identify gaps that exist between the skills, knowledge, and attitudes of current or future salespersons in the organization in order to be successful in the marketplace. To succeed managers should align sales training efforts to support the firm's strategic goals (Tanner, Honeycutt, and Erffmeyer 2009).

Sales teams that operate in different cultures/markets require distinct training programs (Weilbaker and Bennion 1999). Although sales activities may appear to be universal in nature, salesperson behavior differs based upon the local selling environment, which includes: customs, methods, and strategies (Kallet 1981). This means that global

firms cannot simply "export" training programs from the home country to an overseas location (Honeycutt, Ford, and Kurtzman 1996). To better understand local conditions, global firms in Malaysia systematically determined their training needs. That is, these global firms reported that identified training needs were more specific, realistic, and utilized to plan training programs (Jantan and Honeycutt 2002). Also, high-tech firms—which were primarily global companies—conducted a more thorough needs assessment than did low-tech firms in Malaysia (Honeycutt, Karande, and Jantan 2002). In an effort to formalize sales training needs assessment, Weilbaker and Bennion (1999) proposed perceptual mapping methods that identified training needs based upon inputs from U.S. and European buyers, salespersons, and sales managers. The study showed that firms would be unwise to rely upon sales force input alone to determine the training needed to increase selling effectiveness (Weilbaker and Bennion 1999). Sales training needs are most often gathered from inputs from sales/upper management, interviews with buyers/field sales personnel, analyses of performance measures, and firm goals and objectives (Erffmeyer, Russ, and Hair 1991). All these sources are utilized in global situations to identify training needs affected by cultural differences.

Proposition 1: Global sales firms utilize more sophisticated methods and sources to determine sales training needs.

Program Planning and Delivery

The program planning and delivery portion of sales training can be divided into three specific actions: objective setting, planning the program, and conducting the program. These actions are presented in the lower level of Figure 2.

Once global sales training needs are identified, sales managers must establish training objectives that specifically state what will be accomplished during the training program. Training outcomes are maximized when course objectives are aligned with firm goals, identified sales force needs, and required competencies (Attia, Honeycutt, and Jantan 2008). Reported global sales training objectives include: improved sales force negotiation skills (Roman and Ruiz 2003), decreased

sales force expenses (Jantan and Honeycutt 2002), increased sales force morale (Honeycutt et al. 2001), improved face-to-face communication skills (Bush and Ingram 1996), and reduced turnover (Liu 1996). When training objectives are specific, they can be utilized post-training to see if they were accomplished. That is, did the training program address the objectives set by management (Honeycutt 1996)?

Proposition 2: Global sales training objectives are more specific and are aligned with the firm's strategic goals.

Global firms must plan sales training programs carefully to account for cultural differences. That said, cross-cultural training is more successful when it is introduced from leading countries to lagging countries (Attia, Honeycutt, and Jantan 2008) but modified by local bi-cultural employees or consultants to identify cultural mistakes that exist when transferring the training program (Geber 1989). For example, Korean trainers met with their U.S. managers to modify training imported from America (Montago 1996) and global firms in Malaysia translated manuals, utilized local trainers, and integrated training methods to reduce cultural barriers (Jantan and Honeycutt 2002). Global firms must adapt their soft competencies—sales management training or selling skills—while considering standardized training sessions for product information or technical training like implementing customer relationship management (CRM) software for managing buyer relationships (Funakawa 1997).

Proposition 3: Global firms devote more time planning sales training programs to standardize or localize topics taught and instructional methods employed.

In regard to conducting sales training, global firms are more likely to offer different course content and in-class demonstrations in contrast to local firms that stress on-the-job (OJT) training (Roman and Ruiz 2003; Honeycutt et al. 2005). Global firms also devote more time to ethics, market, and buyer information topics while local companies spend most sales training time on product knowledge (Erffmeyer et al. 1993). These findings suggest that global sales firms invest greater resources to design their sales training efforts

to support market-oriented strategic plans that seek to maximize firm profits by satisfying buyer needs (Tanner, Honeycutt, and Erffmeyer 2009; Jantan et al. 2002). Global sales managers are often sent from the home office to overseas locations to provide training and become sensitized to overseas business conditions (Lewin and Johnston 1997). To minimize cultural *faux pas*, global firms carefully plan and conduct their training delivery methods across cultures (Attia, Honeycutt, and Jantan 2008).

Proposition 4: Global sales firms provide sales training that is more market-oriented and supportive of strategic plans.

Sales Training Evaluation

Global sales training is evaluated at one of four levels: reaction, knowledge, behavior, or results (Honeycutt 1996). These evaluations can be formative which provide feedback to improve the training program or summative which gather data to compute the value of the training investment (Scriven 1991). For example, assessing trainee reaction or satisfaction with training methods provides formative information while comparing total sales and profits for territories that received training versus non-trained areas results in summative data.

In regard to assessing sales training programs, Cavusgil (1990) randomly matched Caterpillar sales locations receiving training with control locations and found that sales performance increased at geographical locations that received training. Global firms appear to evaluate sales training programs by comparing groups (macro) that work in a geographical location rather than trying to evaluate individual salesperson (micro) improvement attributable to sales training (Attia, Honeycutt, and Jantan 2008).

A study conducted in Egypt confirmed that self- and supervisor-evaluations of behavior can be utilized to assess sales training programs (Attia and Honeycutt 2012). Likewise, utility analysis can be employed to compute the value of global sales training efforts (Honeycutt et al. 2001). Firms can also operate an assessment center to design and conduct training evaluations in different cultures (Cook and Herche 1992).

Proposition 5: Global sales firms that implement multiple-level sales training evaluations are more likely to engage in continuous improvement which can lead to more success in the long-run.

Culture Mediates the Efficacy of Global Sales Training

Cultural differences influence all international sales (IS) management practices, to include sales training methods. While there are hundreds of definitions of culture, this study defines culture as:

> ..."the collective programming of the mind distinguishing the members of one group or category of people from another" (www. geerthofstede.nl/culture.aspx 2011).

A primary force that impacts all aspects of global sales training is national culture. Culture has been likened to the water that fish swim in since it surrounds all sales management activity (Honeycutt and Kurtzman 2006). Hofstede (1980) proposed five components or levels of national culture that can influence the material taught, the instructor selected, the methods for transferring knowledge, and how managers evaluate global sales training practices (Attia, Honeycutt, and Jantan 2008). The first component is *power distance* and refers to a culture's acceptance of hierarchy or the shared belief that certain individuals are of higher status or importance. Cultural power distance influences how salespersons are trained. For example, power distance impacts the training methods utilized as well as the level of interaction between trainer and trainee (Honeycutt, Ford, and Simintiras 2003).

Uncertainty avoidance refers to how a society deals with ambiguity. In certain cultures—such as Japan, Greece, and Portugal—details are agreed upon prior to conducting training sessions to reduce uncertainty on the part of the applicant/trainee and the interviewer/ trainer. Cultures with high uncertainty avoidance are more likely to offer structured sales training sessions that transfer knowledge one way—from instructor to trainee. Instruction in these cultures also tends to be more formal, ritualistic, and does not deviate from the prepared lesson plan.

Individualism/collectivism relates to the importance of the individual versus the group. The U.S. and

Great Britain are high individualist societies, while most Asian countries practice collectivism. That is, collectivist societies believe that the needs of the group take precedence over individual needs. For example, Chinese citizens tend to be interdependent with others in their group and value personal relationships when conducting business (Singelis 1994). U.S. advertising uses the Marlboro Man® and Merrill Lynch's® "lone bull" to represent consumer individualism, in contrast to Asian cultures that are concerned with group cohesion and safety. As a result of collectivist cultural beliefs, trainees in Asia expect to be taught in groups and are unlikely to compete with students within their group (Ford and Honeycutt 1992).

Masculinity/femininity relates to the traits valued by a society. For example, in the masculine societies of Japan, Austria, and Mexico, strength, success, confidence, and competitiveness are stressed. Conversely, in feminine cultures exampled by Sweden, Denmark, and Thailand, the traits of compassion, quality of life, and relationship building are viewed as being paramount. These values, which may focus on success at any cost versus a high quality lifestyle, determine the sales training topics and skills that are taught.

The final Hofstede component, *long-term orientation*, is prevalent in cultures that focus on the future rather than the present. For example, salespersons in countries with short-term orientations are driven by short-term rewards; whereas, those with a long-term orientation focus more on long-term growth (Honeycutt, Ford, and Simintiras 2003). Firms that have a long-term orientation are more likely to stress relationship building skills and buyer satisfaction instead of teaching trainees to constantly close the deal.

Another cultural dimension that sales managers must take into account is *context*. U.S. and European societies are "low context" cultures, in which communication is explicit and detailed. In other parts of the world—primarily in Asia and the Middle East—"high context" communication occurs which means that individuals speak in more general terms and listeners observe body language for nuance to decipher the ideas being communicated. In more homogeneous societies, higher levels of word-of-mouth and imitation take place (Takada and Jain 1991). Therefore, oral communications

in training salespersons in high context cultures will be less explicit and will require greater reliance on body language and inferences. This means that when managers and salespersons are from different cultures such interactions are more complex and likely to result in cultural *faux pas* by both parties.

Proposition 6: Cultural understanding by planners is positively related to effective global sales training programs.

Performance Improvement from Sales Training

The consequence variable is the measured improvement of sales force performance that is attributable to sales training. For global firms this has been stated as: increased sales volume, increased market share, increased profits, and decreased selling expenses (Honeycutt and Stevenson 1989). Quantitative measures, like those above, are the most objective measures to assess performance improvement attributable to sales training, but these measures are also the most difficult evaluations to perform due to extraneous variables like market conditions, competitor specials, and poor product match up (Attia, Honeycutt, and Jantan 2008).

Caterpillar successfully evaluated their sales training efforts in Central America by matching locations and comparing sales revenue, net revenue per sales call, market share changes, lost sales, and new product sales between trained and untrained sales offices. Then, based upon the reaction of trainees to the training program and quantitative changes in firm performance, Caterpillar modified their sales training "systems or strategies" (Cavusgil 1990, p. 7). Thus, measuring the impact of sales training enables sales managers to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of these programs (Dalrymple, Cron, and De Carlo 2001).

CONCLUSIONS

This study examined global sales training studies to determine what has been learned after three decades of research. First, global sales firms conduct more sophisticated sales training programs that are tied to their strategic plans. This is consistent across the areas of needs assessment, program planning and delivery, and evaluation practices. Second, global firms possess and allocate greater resources to train their sales teams

and believe that training leads to marketplace success. This is evident in the more sophisticated training techniques like product demonstrations, topics that provide skills, knowledge, and attitudes needed to succeed with customers, and adjustments to future training programs that are based upon multiple-level evaluations. Lastly, global firms understand and build cultural understanding into their sales training programs in order to increase their likelihood of success.

Limitations and Recommendations for Future IS Research

In regard to methodological issues, little IS training research has adhered to equivalence guidelines. While most cross-cultural studies report that translation-back translation procedures were followed, the more important "construct-equivalence" is seldom mentioned. Construct equivalence addresses whether the construct being tested has the same meaning across cultures. For example, if salespersons from two or more cultures were asked to complete a survey about "buyer-seller relationships," would respondents view this construct the same? Construct-equivalence comprises seven sub-categories detailed in Table 1. It is accepted that sales training processes differ between countries/cultures, but unless construct-equivalence is satisfied, it is difficult—if not impossible—to answer the more important question of "why" these differences exist. Also of concern are issues with validity; researchers can minimize validity issues by planning studies with strong theoretical bases. However, most current theoretical models in marketing are derived from U.S. scholarship, which may have little applicability elsewhere and severely limits external validity (Walters 2001).

Table 1
Construct-Equivalence Issues in Cross-Cultural Research*

Functional Equivalence	Do similar activities have different functions? For example, a sales person might take a buyer to dinner to build a relationship while another might view the function as creating an obligation to buy.
Conceptual Equivalence	Is the concept expressed similarly in attitudes and behaviors? That is, sales promotions are common in the U.S. but rare in developing nations.
Measurement Equivalence	Is the measure an operational definition of the construct? Do the scale items accurately measure a construct that is culturally invariant?
Calibration Equivalence	Are units of measure—weight, volume, temperature, or distance—equivalent? Colors, which have varying meanings in different cultures, are also included.
Translation Equivalence	Are survey instructions and scale items linguistically equal and understood?
Metric Equivalence	Are data distribution and data dispersions similar between cultural groups? It is important to remember that different scales are used in disparate cultures.
Instrument Equivalence	Are scale items, response categories, and survey stimuli interpreted identically across cultures?

*These equivalence categories are derived from Craig and Douglas (2000) and Malholtra et al. 2004.

Based upon these conclusions, the following recommendations are offered for future directions in global sales training research:

1. **What parts of training should be designed centrally and what parts locally?**
   a. Should needs analyses be performed locally and approved centrally?
   b. Should sales training objectives be set locally or centrally?
   c. What role should the home office play in planning local sales training programs?
   d. Should the home office determine what levels of training evaluation to perform?
   e. Should the home office fund an assessment center to manage disparate global sales training efforts?

2. **What parts of training should be standardized and what parts adapted?**
   a. Can any step(s) of the training process be standardized or do cultural conditions necessitate that all steps of the training process be adapted?
   b. Can technical, product, and country training topics be standardized? Should market information and sales skills always be adapted?

3. **What sales training materials can be transferred across cultures and what materials must be modified?**
   a. Can product and company information be transferred across cultures?
   b. What changes are necessary to teach selling skills in disparate cultures/nations?
   c. Is a local trainer preferable to an overseas sales trainer? For what topics?
   d. Under what conditions should an overseas trainer be utilized?
   e. Can self-directed learning (SDL) technology such as online tutorials be utilized globally and across different sales cultures? If so, how?

4. **What criteria work best for evaluating groups of salespersons who receive sales training?**
   a. What criteria are most important for determining sales training success?
   b. Is matching locations to compare training outcomes a viable methodology?

c. How can executives be convinced that training evaluation is an important process?
d. Should individualistic and collectivistic cultures be evaluated using different criteria?

For three decades a wide range of sales training research has been conducted in the global marketplace. However, a significant number of questions remain that require additional studies to resolve. Most of these questions are related to the mediating effect of culture on sales force training. This research offers six propositions for global sales training that can be translated into testable hypotheses for further empirical study. In addition, a wealth of possibilities exist for exploring the myriad issues related to construct-equivalence and expanding research beyond U.S. scholarship to extend the generalizability of findings.

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