

## Exploring the Dark Side of Trust in Business Relationships from the Perspective of Sales People

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As trust is identified as one of the most central factors in business-to-business relationships, sales people devote a lot of time and effort to build it with their customers. However, suggestions that trust may have negative aspects might be found in literature too. The aim of the paper is to identify dark side of trust in the work of sales people. Exploratory data were collected from essays written by sales managers responsible for customer relationships. As a result the negative consequences of trust for the sales people's attitude and behavior of salespeople were discussed. The managerial implications of these findings were discussed and several directions for future research proposed.

Sales people devote a lot of time and effort to build trust with their customers. Researchers agree that such efforts bring positive economic and relational results (Akrouf and Akrouf, 2011). The commonly accepted research perspective usually assumes that it is the seller that builds trust and the buyer that takes a risk in a situation of uncertainty related to the positive assessment of reliability, goodwill and honesty of the other party and the decision to trust the supplier (Wood et al., 2008). Although the seller's trust is an interesting issue from that point of view it has been examined very seldom.

Much of the literature on trust concentrates on situations in which its degree is high and high trust is perceived as definitely positive (Dietz and Den Hartog, 2006). Few researchers suggest that trust can be dysfunctional and lead to negative consequences for one or both parties in a relationship or for the relationship itself (e.g. McEvily et al., 2003). It is not clear, however, which aspects of trust can be negative and in what way and neither is there a consensus as to the nature of the "dark side" of trust.

The problems of the seller's trust towards a customer and the negative issues of this trust constitute clear gaps in the literature on the subject. Therefore in this paper

the viewpoint of the seller is taken in order to seek answers to questions about the negative consequences that trust might cause for the sellers' attitude and behavior in relationships with customers. According to sales' literature sales people play not only the commercial role, but they are perceived as an essential element of the marketing and relational function. It is stressed that sellers perform the roles of personal and direct intermediaries between two entities: the customer and the supplier, thus they are perceived as prototypical boundary spanners (Matsuo, 2006). As the sales paradigm has shifted to a stronger focus on relationship selling the role of the seller is highlighted in the concepts of customer-oriented sales developed since the 1990s: relationship selling (Jolson 1997), partnering oriented behavior (Weitz and Bradford 1999), consultative selling (Liu and Leach, 2001) and agility selling (Chonko and Jones 2005). The need to engage sellers in building and maintaining a good customer relationship is highly stressed and close relationships are perceived as enabling the achievement of specific benefits, which would be difficult to gain in arms-length relationships (Forsström 2005; Ford et al., 2008). These sales concepts, which are still relevant, as well as works on business-to-business relationships, identify trust as a critical factor differentiating effective from ineffective sales to some business customers (Smith and Barclay, 1997; Hawes, Mast and Swan, 1989; Jolson 1997).

A number of studies on trust are general in nature and do not concern sales (Adams et al., 2010), therefore, there are no clear concepts exploring the negative aspects of trust from the perspective of sales people.

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Since there is no coherent theory on the downsides of trust, the discussion is based on a literature review and exploratory research based on essays written by sales managers working with business customers. We believe that drawing attention to the dark side of trust will help to provide a better understanding of the nature of this complex and fragile phenomenon. Knowledge about the negative phenomena associated with trust can be useful both for academics and practitioners.

The paper is structured as follows. First, the role of trust in business-to-business relationships is discussed. The second part is devoted to the dark side of trust that is presented in the literature on business relationships. The empirical part concerns analysis of essays on the downsides of trust in sales written by sales managers. The paper concludes with a discussion in which we propose a framework of the dark side of trust from the perspective of sales people.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

### **Trust in business relationships**

There is a variety of definitions of trust in the literature which emphasize some particular features of it and the role of trust (Li, 2015). The most cited definitions of trust in the literature on management and marketing were presented by Morgan and Hunt (1994) and Moorman and colleagues (1992). The first authors define trust as belief in the reliability and honesty of the other party. In this approach trust is described as a subjective and aggregated set of beliefs about the other party and the relationship with it. These beliefs lead to the assumption that the probable actions of the other party will have positive effects. Treating trust as an attitude is embedded in psychology and implies a willingness to be vulnerable based on a confident expectation of the trustee's trustworthiness (Colquitt et al., 2007; Li, 2015).

According to the second, behavioral approach, trust is perceived as a willingness to rely on the other party assuming that their actions or intentions will be in accord with their declarations. In that approach trust is perceived as a behavioral intention and/or trusting behavioral actions (Akrouit and Akrouit, 2011). While the earlier approach to trust is associated with a subjective belief about credibility of the other party, the behavioral

approach is associated with a defined behavior that does not necessarily have to occur. For example, a customer is willing to trust the seller, but the conditions for him to materialize his decision towards a seller can never occur.

As a further consideration we adopted an integrative approach, which represents a compromise for the psychological and behavioral tradition of trust. Thus trust is defined as "one's calculative or non-calculative beliefs, sentiments or actions comprising the intention to accept vulnerability based on the positive expectations of another's intentions or behaviors" Akrouit (2015). Thus we refer to both attitudes and behaviors, which are the result of cognitive expectations and affective moods. Mutual trust is embedded in the seller and the customer relationship and is based on repetitive interactions that might occur on in individual and organizational dimension. In sales literature most research has been limited to the sales person and the dimensions of the selling firm which are the target of the trust (Wood et al., 2008). Akrouit and Akrouit (2011) propose the extension of these two dimensions (individual and organizational) to a relational dimension. The relationship dimension consists of several components: the nature of exchange (e.g. dependency), the quality of relationship (e.g. communication) and the partner's behavior (e.g. investment in the relationship).

### **Trust from salespersons' angle**

Placing sales in relationship with the customer is associated with certain attitudes and actions aimed at long-term relationship outcomes. Wood and colleagues (2008) perceive attitudes and behaviors as the quality measures of the seller-buyer relationship. They characterize attitudes as a multidimensional construct consisting of: satisfaction, commitment and perception of trustworthiness. Perceived trustworthiness in the seller-customer relationship, which can be linked to trust-as-attitude approach (Li, 2015), is identified in four dimensions: character, role competence, judgment, and motives or intentions (Smith and Barclay 1997).

Referring to behaviors Wood and colleagues (2008) identify activities related to sales and investment. In our case, from the behavioral perspective, trust is defined as trusting actions that reflect the willingness to accept vulnerability in the face of uncertainty. Therefore, they

are demonstrations of trust and might be treated as an indicator of taking the risk of trusting the customer, which results from the attitude of the “trustor” (Akroun and Diello, 2017). According to Smith and Barclay (1997), such behaviors include: relationship investment, influence acceptance, communication openness, control reduction and forbearance to opportunism.

Both attitudes and behaviors may eventually effect the seller’s business relationship with the buyer. Trust is perceived by many as a key determinant of effective business relationships (Fang et al., 2008). The consequences of trust for business-to-business selling may be divided into two groups: sales performance, e.g. an increase in sales, efficiency, a decrease in costs, predictability of the buyer’s behavior (Palmatier et al., 2007) and relational advantages, e.g. engagement, willingness to continue cooperation, satisfaction, information exchange on the customer’s future needs (Andaleeb, 1995; Schurr and Ozanne, 1985; Doney et al., 2007; Akroun and Akroun, 2011). The research quoted shows the consequences of the buyer’s trust in the seller, but does not take into account the reverse situation in which the seller trusts the customer. Business relationships are underpinned by attitudes and behaviors of all partners within a relationship, thus sales people’s perceptions are also important but omitted in the context of trust.

### **Dark side of trust in business relationships**

Despite the undoubtedly favourable consequences of close business relationships, over the last decade the issue of the dark side of such relationships has also been increasingly brought up in academic discourse. Similarly there are suggestions that in relationships with customers trust may have its dark side (Abosag et al., 2016). which does not exclude the positive outcomes of trust. In other words, it can be assumed that trust is neither good nor bad in its nature, but has some particular aspects that may produce a negative phenomenon (Thorgren and Wincent, 2011). Numerous authors recognize the risks associated with trust and call for an examination of that issue in research (e.g. Moorman et al., 1992; Zaheer et al., 1998; Das and Teng, 2001; Nooteboom, 2002; Thorgren and Wincent, 2011). However, few authors touch deeply upon the issue of the downsides of trust which has received little attention.

In examining the degree of trust (low, average, high) there are particularly negative aspects of trust highlighted which becomes excessive because it results in decreasing benefits or even negative consequences (Gargiulo and Ertug, 2006). Nooteboom (2002) uses the phrase “pathological state of trust” to describe a relationship in which trust becomes blind and unconditional. It is not possible, however, to specify the optimal degree of trust for a given relationship, because it is embedded in a context and the parties interpret and perceive interaction in a diversified way. On the other hand, Gargiulo and Ertug (2006) come to the conclusion that a major perspective in the literature concerns too low a degree of trust, which does not allow the achievement of the maximum effects. In their opinion there is a point of inflection in the degree of trust (“optimal degree of trust”), which having been exceeded can be described as excessive (“blind faith”) and may result in diminishing benefits or even negative consequences. The problem of an excessive degree of trust is discussed by Stevens and colleagues (2015). In their opinion the achievement of the optimal degree of trust in a given relationship becomes a challenge that is difficult or even impossible to meet due to the embedded relationships in the context and a varied interpretation and perception of the interaction by the exchange parties. In this paper we analyze high trust, either optimal or excessive but we do not analyze low trust or lack of trust.

In organizational relationships the basis of trust is extended beyond individual interactions to organizational actions. In this context Thorgren and Wincent (2011) indicate problems related to trust occurring in the organizational dimension. Organizations develop a collective perception of the implementation of tasks within the supplier-buyer relationship and routines concerning the scope of duties and ways in which to fulfill them. The reduced need for monitoring and controlling in trust-based relationships enables an exchange and development of relational routines at significantly lower costs. Thorgren and Wincent illustrate the possibility of organizational inflexibility and relational proximity/intimacy occurring, which may cause dysfunctional relationships or inefficiencies in organizations.

The negative aspects of trust are also related to its dynamics of relationship. Trust in relationships develops and changes depending on the history of cooperation and interaction. It can therefore be seen as an ongoing process that must be initiated, maintained, sometimes restored and constantly authenticated (Stevens et al., 2015). It means that trust, which is fragile and sensitive, is constantly threatened, repaired and changed. Building trust by the seller is time consuming and requires expenditure (Connel and Mannion, 2006). Meanwhile trust built up over time can be easily lost by either an actual or perceived wrong or recognised as incorrect behavior (Schoorman et al., 2007, Kim et al., 2009).

### **Research quest**

Building on this literature review we assume that trust has some bright, but also dark side. The goal of the study of the dark side of trust is to better understand how the seller's attitude and bahavior is shaped by trust. The main research questions studied were: (a) What is sales people's approach to the role of trust in relationships with their customers? (b) What kind of dark side of trust is identified in a trust-based relationship? (c) What is the sales people's interpretation of the dark side of trust? To arrive at the dark side of the seller's high degree of trust we looked for some characteristics of salespeople attitude and behavior as facets of trust, which form the basis for its dark side in three dimensions: individual, organizational and relational. Individual dimension refers to the salesperson, organizational to sales team or company and relational to what links companies and happens between them because of the interlocking of actors, resources and activities.

### **METHOD**

Since our aim is to provide a deeper insight into dark side of trust in business-to-business relationships of sellers with customers we chose to undertake an exploratory study. More specifically, it is an interpretational approach which is widely used in social sciences and which is also used in research concerning trust in business-to-business relationships (e.g. Bunduchi, 2008; Finch, Wagner, and Hynes, 2010; Ekici, 2013). Such an approach to research into trust is suggested by Arnott (2007), whereas Seppänen, Blomqvist and Sundqvist (2007) highlight the need for qualitative

empirical studies into the concept that "apparently is not easy to measure."

We decided in favor of exploratory research because this can be applied in situations where an in-depth cognitive insight is necessary to understand a given phenomenon. That research usually involves a small number of entities, chosen in a purposive sampling. The analysis of the information and results collected is qualitative and the goal was to determine the nature of the phenomenon being studied and to identify its structure. As a result the direction of further research can be determined (Babbie, 2007).

In order to fulfill our aim we used essays which enabled the collection of long statements that reflected the respondents' experiences and earlier activities together with their positive and negative effects (Makkonen et al., 2012). The participants in the study had four weeks to write an essay entitled "Dark Side of Trust in Customer Relationships" which concentrated on the following aspects: (1) information about the author, his company and his role in building relationships with customers; (2) challenges related to trust building in relationships with customers; (3) situations and incidents when trust became an obstacle in relationships with customers.

Data was gathered in Poland from January to April 2017. An invitation to write such an essay was sent to 74 sales-managers who were intentionally chosen from a database regarding their experience in managing sales to business customers (with the exclusion of companies selling commodity goods because of low importance of long-term relationships). 37 essays were collected but 5 were rejected because their authors, instead of focusing on relationships based on trust, concentrated on relationships characterized by lack of trust, thus 32 essays remained. Authors of those essays (18 women and 14 men) managed sales teams and have direct interactions with buyers. Essays consisted of stories of relationships based on trust, explanations of trust and its challenges and opinions about those issues. Essays had an average of five pages (approximately 9600 characters), their authors represented companies of varied profiles (services - 10, production - 14, trade - 8); industry (business process outsourcing/shared services, construction, FMCG and others); and size (from small to the branches of global corporations)



(see Appendix A). All the authors of essays manage customer relationships on a daily basis.

Analysis of the essays had interpretive character to seek to understand evidence and interpretations of trust and its dark side in relationships with customers. Analytical work was conducted in three stages: deconstruction, interpretation, and reconstruction (Miles, Huberman 1994). Deconstruction divided data into component parts in order to see what is included in relation to: interpretations of the role of trust, negative aspects of trust and signs of an attitude or behavior as dark side of trust. The first author developed the codes and then adjusted them together with the second author and finally the first author assigned categories to each component part according to dimension of trust (individual, organizational, relational) and facets of trust (attitude and behavior). Interpretation involved comparing data codes and categories within and across transcripts. Interpreting data included discussion and comparison of component parts by two researchers. Finally reconstruction was aimed at repackaging the component parts and themes to show relationships and insights derived in the interpretation phase and to find explanations referring them to existing theory and practice. All discrepancies were discussed by both researchers and then the procedure was repeated until internal consent was reached. As there was no influence on authors or control of their work during the writing of the essays the analytical work was able to provide evidence of thinking or alternative interpretations of the role of the dark side of trust. Inductive process was used to progress from the given evidence to more general conclusions.

## EMPIRICAL FINDINGS

The presentation of the findings is divided into five sections. First the interpretation of the role of trust in relationships with customers and interpretation of aspects of trust that form its dark side was presented. Then an interpretation of the dark side of trust in the individual, organizational and relational dimension was discussed. For a summary of findings see Table 2.

### The role of trust in relationships with customers

While defining trust in business relationships the authors of the essays most often pointed out its bilateral nature and the necessity to believe in the mutual trust and

truthfulness of both the buyer and the seller. At the same time they emphasized the complexity of the process:

*“which consists of many elements, amongst others their previous experience in cooperation, principles of cooperation, communication method, commitment and reliability of the company’s employees, the ability to be a partner, openness.”*

Even though the great majority of respondents emphasized the role of the human factor, because *“trust is built by people who contact the contractor”* (primarily the authors wrote about the role and engagements of sellers in this area), but there were also statements discussing trust management in the organizational dimension (e.g. by investing in the brand, CSR).

The authors agreed on the importance of trust, which *“has some positive connotations, such as prosperity, success, cooperation, partnership”* and perceived it as *“the foundation of the relationship”*, *“obligatory value”*, *“foundation of mutual dependencies.”* Respondents referred both to the economic effects of trust (reduction of transaction costs, security costs, expenses related to signing contracts, the company’s financial results, the opportunity to increase sales) and non-economic effects (it simplifies relationships, improves processes, increases predictability of customer behaviors, increases customers’ satisfaction, reduces the need for control, allows the obtaining of recommendations).

*“Trust is a kind of simplification. Thanks to trust we operate more efficiently and make decisions faster. It is a kind of accelerator that speeds up action without any problems. Trust significantly affects the quality of relationships of trade partners, improves certain processes and allows the prediction as to how a given party will behave in the future. It also has an impact on the company’s financial results.” (R24)*

Trust can be a source of the competitive advantage, as:

*“with high trust between the company and customers, they are more likely to share their know-how, experience and preferences and are more willing to support the company in shaping the company’s offer. Companies which know how to manage trust and customer loyalty achieve higher profits and are able to maintain an advantage in a very competitive market.” (R8)*

**What turns trust into “dark”?**

The analysis of the essays allowed the identification of a variety of aspects of the shaping of the dark side of trust in the seller- buyer relationships. Describing their negative experiences connected with trust, the authors referred to some aspects of trust that were the source of problems for the seller and his organization. Respondents pointed to the fact of linking trust with the relationship itself and its variables, such as commitment or satisfaction. Another aspect resulted directly from the definition of trust, according to which the trustor (in this case - the seller) is sensitive to the actions performed

by the other party. If the buyer behaves in a confident manner this situation has no negative feedback. However the dark side appears when the buyer will not reciprocate trust and being simultaneously aware of the seller's trust will take advantage of the situation and behave in an opportunistic manner. Numerous authors associated the dark side of trust with its high degree, which for one group meant “blind” and unconditional trust, while the other group perceived high trust as the unique value that, once achieved, should not be lost. Table 1 presents all the aspects of trust identified by sellers as potential sources of its dark side.

Table 1. Aspects of trust causing the dark side of trust

Aspects of trust	Interpretation derived from essays
Blindness	Blind faith and unconditional trust become the basis for judgments and decisions, obscuring rational assessment of the situation
Fragility	Long built trust can be easily lost, regardless of their own actions, due to attitudes and behaviors of the other supplier's employees or other entities on the market
Promises too much	The customer's trust in the seller is a highly desirable value because of the numerous positive effects. The seller will be determined to maintain the status quo and does not want to lose it once a high degree of trust has been built, as a result he becomes its slave
Interlocked with other dimensions of a relationship	Trust is directly related to other variables of the relationship (including involvement and satisfaction), or is even equated with a good relationship with the customer. Losing or destroying trust means destroying the relationship
Is based on a leap of faith	The customer's awareness of the high trust of the seller increases both the risk of opportunistic behaviors and misusing the seller's attitude
Blurred individual and organizational trust	The phenomenon of the transfer of trust may turn out to be difficult to obtain, i.e. trust in the organization does not translate into trust in its sales representatives who often change or in a situation where personal goals hinder organizational goals), On the other hand, in social science, the equivalent of trust in business relationships is a public trust. In the case of a business cooperation based on trust it may occur that the relationship exceeds the business nature of the relationship, which can affect the growth of customer expectation and increase their demanding attitudes
Needs constant effort	Trust requires a constant investment of an organisation's and personal resources, which can exceed achieved results or the investment can turn out to be a failure

The aforementioned aspects of trust are not unfavourable per se, but may shape the dark side of the relationship, when the seller or his organization is not able to cope with the challenges arising from them or are opportunistically used by the buyer.

### **Individual dimension of dark side of trust**

Considering the individual interactions of the seller with the customer the authors of the essays implied that a high degree of trust may lead to a misinterpretation of the customer's motives and intentions. Assuming the mutual character of trust, sellers expect a mirrored attitude on the buyer's side and thus they are sensible to its actions. Meanwhile the assessment of the buyer's credibility and his trustful behaviors may turn out to be false and his promises inconsistent with his actions. The seller's vigilance is then put off guard which makes him an easy target for a transactionally minded buyer.

*A too excessive involvement when we, as a supplier, care more about a good relationship than a partner, for example because of participation in a business portfolio, may lead to pathological situations in the form of some addiction, where one party reaches a dominant position, which he will use expecting better terms of cooperation, treatment and ignoring unfair treatment. (R27)*

On the other hand false judgements may also concern "hard parameters" such as the customer's potential or financial credibility. An emotional attitude to the customer causes the abandonment of hard data analysis, belief in the buyer's declarations and the neglect of the verification of data received from him.

Some authors also linked the dark side of trust with the failure of a relationship based on trust. Building trust in the customer by the seller is associated with the effort and anticipation of positive effects. When the seller's actions are unsuccessful (lack of expected results, customer's dishonesty or pressure), it could cause disappointment, loss of motivation or even loss of trust in other buyers.

The authors of the essays unanimously agreed that the hard-won customer's trust with his high engagement has therefore a high value. As a result authors pointed the fear of losing trust and of putting a lot of effort into

maintaining it, bearing of costs often disproportionate to the effects obtained or refraining from actions which, in their opinion, could result in a lowering of trust. One of the respondents quoted a situation in which the seller, despite the customer's mistakes, was unwilling to pay attention and ask about it fear of being accused as "distrustful."

*Another threat in a relationship based on trust is the fear of providing information hypothetically unfavorable or negative aspects of cooperation. An example of such a situation is common practice in company X, when it is necessary to provide some information about the need to pay an additional fee for the implementation of the service which exceeds the arrangements signed in the contract. (R9)*

The essays also allowed the identification of the sellers' undesirable behaviors, which may result from high trust. Respondents referred to them: work under pressure of trust, influence acceptance and acceptance of opportunism. Work under pressure of trust ("we trust each other though") is associated on the one hand with abuse by the customer, "trust" as an argument in the relationship (blackmail) and putting pressure on, payment dates, delivery terms or the performance of some extra work which exceeds the subject of the contract. Thus, according to the respondents, the seller becomes a "slave of trust".

*A sale representative who has established a friendly relationship with customers sometimes becomes their slave. If the customer senses it, he starts using it: he asks for a bigger discount, for a longer term of payment, for urgent deliveries ... And it is hard to refuse him in such situation, because we have been doing business for a long time, we have known each other for a long time and as a matter of fact, once we give way, it will not be a big deal, it becomes worse as the situation is repeated and the customer quickly gets used to it. Later such customers simply check how far they can go, how much we will concede. (R28)*

Working under the pressure of trust and at the same time the acceptance of such influence also results in a biased work-life balance meant as serving customer after working hours, during holidays or even illness. An

unjustified sacrifice of one's private time and meeting the "excessive demands" of customers is often the result of the transition of a business relationship into a private one, which both sides perceive as a close, more "emotional" attachment. Then, if situations which are difficult to solve arise, the customer will expect taking action in his own favor and, as a "colleague," better treatment. In the case of such close relationships, refusing the customer's requests becomes problematic. This results in reduced cooperation efficiency.

*In this case, the seller is available all the time for one customer. The employee became a "slave" to the relationship. It means a continuous, daily implementation of urgent orders. The customer has already stopped respecting the private time of the seller, which lead to the situation when his orders are placed even on Sunday afternoon. (R16)*

#### **Organizational dimension of dark side of trust**

In the organizational dimension the authors of the essays indicated that trust affects the sellers' attitudes and behaviors through the interlocking of the sales people's activities with other representatives of their organization. An unbalanced investment related to only one supplier's representative and their relationship with the customer means that the change of such a person requires actions counteracting the use of this situation by customers or supporting the trust of customers in new employees.

The authors of the essays emphasized that rebuilding trust requires a lot of effort, when the previous employee was perceived by the customer as a valuable source of technical know-how. If the salesperson's associates abused the customer's trust then he (as the person with often the closest relationship with the customer in the entire sales team) must take actions aimed at regaining the customer's trust in the company. While building or regaining trust in the individual dimension does not generate high costs, it does in the organizational dimension. Authors described the entire range of high relationship investment undertaken by their companies to regain customer trust: increasing the qualifications of employees serving the customer, more time spent on the customer and funds for visiting him, hiring new specialists, organizing workshops and conferences,

participation in dinners, gifts, free samples, price discounts, accepting exorbitant customer expectations that are unprofitable for the supplier.

Attention was also paid to the behaviors of the entire supplying organization, pointing out that too much emphasis is placed on customer trust. Excessive focus on good cooperation relying on mutual trust leads to overinvestment in the relationship with the customer as a result of the overriding rational relationship assessment. It evokes an unjustified conviction that the customer will always behave according to the promises made. The supplying organization waives the signing of a letter of intent or agreement regulating the terms of cooperation, which makes it difficult to accept the consequences if the customer fails to comply with mutual arrangements. In this way the role of trust as a mechanism of control is overestimated and can lead to the withdrawal from formal forms of control.

*There are also customers who, under the pretext of cooperation, come with an interest in a product, introduce some changes to it, sometimes even forcing the supplier to produce samples, occasionally demanding that they be sent to their headquarters, for which they even do not want to pay and also not to encourage their customers to buy them, but wish to have them in order to copy the solutions found and place the production somewhere with their existing contractors, usually located in the Far East. This is a typical example of how easy it is to abuse and use trust, if one side is trying to act honestly, meet customers, without setting initial conditions and does not demand the signature of dozens of documents before any cooperation. (R12)*

High trust also influences the supplier's behaviors at the interface of individual and organizational dimensions, when good personal relationships between the seller and the customer block the implementation of the company's policy in cooperation with this customer. Trust makes it difficult for the seller to sign a contract with the customer and to introduce the procedures, schedules and cooperation standards required by his company.

*The problem arises also when we do not formalize certain arrangements while building trust. With the*



*lack of such clear arrangements the other party will try to interpret the terms to its advantage. (R8)*

The high customer trust in the seller can lead to the reinforcement of the seller's orientation for their own purposes and conflict with the goals of their company. The seller may strive to achieve a high level of sales in a given period (mainly to fulfill the requirements of the bonus system), even if this will result in additional costs for his company. It is also possible to use the customer's trust to achieve other benefits, purely personal ones. Staying in the comfort of cooperation with a trusted customer, the seller comes to the conclusion that not every action incompatible with the policy of his company will see "daylight" and discrepancies with the company's policy will not be revealed.

*The limits of our actions are set by ourselves and they concern us more and the goals we achieve than the company for which we work. (R20)*

One of the essays also described the issue of the excessive transfer of the customer's organization's reputation of trust to its representatives by the seller. The seller, in trusting the buying company in view of procedures implemented may, too quickly, gain trust in its employees. In this way the seller too optimistically assumes that each customer's employee has the same attitude and behaviors as the entire organization. The use of such mental short cuts lowers the seller's guard.

### **Relational dimension of dark side of trust**

The authors of the essays emphasized that trust is related to the interdependence of parties entering relationships as well as the dynamics of relationships. The transfer of attention from the seller's single interactions with the customer on the relationship that binds both sides enables the viewing of the essays to be made through the prism of the interplay of interacting companies. A long-lasting relationship based on high trust leads to a progressive change of seller attitude which is demonstrated in the loss of vigilance and a weakening of the rational assessment of the relationship. The seller's understanding of the customer grows, so he accepts less and less critically explanations and diminishes the customer's mistakes. This may lead to overlooking or misinterpreting the signals indicating

the customer's problems (especially those regarding a customer's solvency) or expanding cooperation with competitors. Moreover putting the seller off guard through a close relationship makes him prone to the opportunistic actions of the customer. Losing vigilance influences seller behaviors, in which there is a growing acceptance of the customer's opportunist actions. In such a situation the seller agrees to further far-reaching demands, particularly regarding payment terms.

*There is always a certain game between a seller and a customer. A good and loyal customer can weaken the vigilance of even the best seller. We never know what the customer is up to. Perhaps his heartfelt attitude is only for the purpose of directing trade talks to get the biggest discounts by "turning off" the seller's reasoned thinking. Maybe it gives the impression of a devoted customer who has not bought a lot of goods from us, and now its aim is to place a big order, get big discounts, collect the goods and leave, so that you will never pay for it. (R15)*

High trust also negatively effects the proactive attitude of the seller, which along with the duration of a close, trust-based relationship becomes more passive. The authors of the essays described this phenomenon using the words "laziness", "contentment", "sense of security", "peace of mind." That attitude results from the conviction that the customer's purchases are somehow guaranteed by a good relationship based on high trust. The seller transfers the trust that characterized the relationship with the customer in the past to the future, forgetting the fragility of trust. This attitude translates into seller's actions characterized by diminishing involvement and innovation, as well as the growing tendency to avoid difficult topics and underestimating the customer's minor feedbacks.

*Letting the guard down resulting from many years of fruitful cooperation which guaranteed "peace of mind," certainty of renewing contracts and the unchangeability of trade conditions are, in today's competitive market, the simplest way to commit professional suicide. Excessive self-confidence threatens to lose the position on the market, and in extreme cases even the closure of the company. (R17)*

The passive attitude and lowering of the seller's guard through a relationship based on trust also affects the attitude towards new relationships. The effort involved in winning the customer's trust is sometimes so big that the sellers are reluctant to look for new customers. This reluctance may also result from fears of a regular customer's reaction to attempts at the starting of a cooperation with its competitor. Thus strengthening trust in one relationship limits the possibility of expanding the group of customers.

The authors of the essays paid a lot of attention to the sellers' actions related to the relationship investment. The point was stressed on the effort put in to building trust, which cannot be limited only to the initial stage of the relationship. Investing in gaining trust may require consistency and a long-term orientation from the seller and his sales team. The more investment in the relationship, the stronger may be the doubts related to the scale of costs incurred to gain trust, especially when assessing the customer potential is difficult. There are also fears that creating the initial trust was only a tool for the buyer to obtain favorable conditions for cooperation, which could not be changed in favor of the supplier along with the development of the relationship.

The dynamics of the relationship were also quoted in the essays to describe the fragility of trust and events that lead to its loss. According to the essays actions taken to rebuild trust are difficult, work-intensive and time-consuming and require a lot of commitment from the seller. They require a greater effort from the seller than gaining trust at the beginning of a relationship. If these activities bring results, they can often lead to cooperation under worse conditions than before losing trust. It is caused by the need to sacrifice some parameters of cooperation for trust.

A different aspect of relationship investment is the reduction of activities after gaining the customer's trust. The organization may focus on acquiring new customers, forgetting that the expectations of their existing customers will grow thanks to high trust. The customer assumes that a trusted supplier tries to meet his expectations and that the supplier's employees who do not interact frequently with the customer assume that thanks to trust he will forgive minor errors and delays. The seller is limited here by the actions of the

entire sales team, which may overrate the durability of the customer's trust.

*If the cooperation does not cause problems, then we devote time to others, at the expense of our, usually good, contractor. We are not in touch so frequently, the relationship disappears, and the problem that occasionally appears is "swept" under the carpet, or waits in line to be solved. The relationship goes down to the transaction level, the customer starts looking for a new supplier, and then it might be too late to rescue the relationship. (R24)*

The last of the areas in which the impact of high trust on the behavior of sellers has been diagnosed is associated with the limitation of communication leading to negative relational outcomes. The seller becomes a hostage to previous investment in gaining the customer's trust and devotes his current revenue to protect that trust. It mostly refers, according to the authors of the essays, to price increases, changes in terms of payment, delivery conditions and launching new products. A concern over potential customer reaction blocks the seller, who postpones hard talks over time.

The results of the research were collected in Table 2, which reflect the aspects of trust and the seller's attitude/behavior, adopted in the analysis of essays presented.

## **DISCUSSION**

The aim of this study was to provide some insight into the complex phenomenon of trust in the seller-customer relationship. The paper is an attempt to answer the call of numerous researchers to take a closer look at the negative aspects of trust (Young et al., 2012). Using essays as the research technique, an effort is made to provide a better understanding of this little recognized topic.

In contrast to most previous studies, which suggest that trust building always leads to desirable outcomes (Dirks and Ferrin 2001), our research reveals that trust can be counterproductive in ways that extend beyond the obvious vulnerabilities discussed in previous research. The negative impact of intra-entity trust appears to be caused by excessive vulnerability, closeness, insularity and perhaps even a perception of invulnerability. This supports Palmatier and colleagues (2007) and their suggestions on the dark sides of the longitudinal development of business relationships.

Table 2. Dark side of trust from the sellers' perspective

Aspects of trust	Interpretation of dark side of trust by salespeople	
	Attitude	Behavior
Blindness	<b>I: misleading judgements (R1, R2, R5, R7, R19, R21, R23)*</b> R: along with the development of trust, the loss of vigilance (R2, R8, R11, R19), passivity (R4, R17)***	<b>I: influence acceptance (R23), biased work-life balance (R18, R21), forbearance of opportunism (R1)</b> <i>O: Re-evaluation of the role of trust as a mechanism of control (R9, R26)**</i>
Fragility	<b>I: decrease of engagement (R9, R14)</b>	<i>O: distracted sales team communication (R31)</i> R: Relationship investment (R2, R7, R11)
Promises too much	<b>I: misleading judgements (R25)</b> R: passivity (R23), reluctance to form new relationships (R2)	<b>I: influence acceptance (R2, R17, R24), biased work-life balance because of influence acceptance (R16)</b> <i>O: relationship investment (R2)</i> R: limitation of communication leading to negative outcomes (R7, R9, R22)
Needs constant effort	<b>I: misleading judgements (R18)</b> R: passivity (R9)	<b>I: biased work-life balance (R20)</b> <i>O: distracted sales team communication (R31), relationship investment (R27 R30)</i> R: Relationship investment (R2, R6, R14, R24, R32)
Is based on a leap of faith	<b>I: misleading judgements (R30)</b> R: along with the development of trust, the loss of vigilance (R15)	<b>I: influence acceptance (R2, R4, R6, R13, R17, R28), biased work-life balance (R16, R18), forbearance of opportunism (R9, R24)</b> <i>O: Re-evaluation of the role of trust as a mechanism of control (R12)</i> R: relationship investment (R8, R11), acceptance of opportunism (R13, R22), limitation of communication leading to negative outcomes (R3)
Blurred individual and organizational trust	<i>O: salesperson character – focus on your own goals, not on an entity (R16, R20), transferring the company's reputation to its employees (R12)</i>	<b>I: influence acceptance (R15, R21, R30), biased work-life balance (R10)</b> <i>O: Blocking the formalization of cooperation (R8), relationship investment (R2, R4, R22, R24), distracted sales team communication (R4)</i> R: relationship investment (R22)
Interlocked with other dimensions of relationship	<b>I: decrease of engagement (R9), misleading judgements (R18, R27)</b> R: misleading judgements (R14)	

\* **I:...** stands for interpersonal dimension\*\* *O:* ... stands for organizational dimension\*\*\* *R:* ... stands for relationship dimension

The aspects of trust indicated in the essays, which may cause its dark sides, coincided with literature, because they referred to an excessive degree of trust and its blind form (Gargiulo and Ertug, 2006), the necessity to constantly invest in trust and caring for it (Stevens et al., 2015; Connel and Mannion, 2006) or its fragility (Blois, 1999). Attention was also paid to the multidimensionality of trust (individual, organizational, relational) and the interdependence of trust with other dimensions of the relationship (commitment, satisfaction) which is confirmed in the literature (Akrouit and Akrouit 2011). The dark sides of trust described in the essays are derived from various aspects of trust, which broadens the present point of view presented in the literature, where every dark side of trust was associated with a certain aspect of trust. For example misleading judgments, which Ertug and Gargiulo (2006) associate with excessive trust. Meanwhile, the information obtained by this study indicates that misleading judgments can also be the result of other aspects of trust (e.g. blindness, promising too much, need of constant effort).

The data collected allowed an indication of the dark side of trust, taking into account the attitudes and behaviors of the sellers presented in the literature (Smith and Barclay 1997; Wood et al. 2008). On the one hand, dark sides of trust were interpreted as a perception of trustworthiness (e.g. misleading judgments, loss of vigilance) and affective attitudes (e.g. passivity, reluctance, decrease of commitment). On the other hand the authors of the essays associated them with behaviors in relation to the customer (e.g. influence acceptance, forbearance of opportunism, distracted communication). An analysis of the essays also allowed the identification of behaviors related to a biased work-life balance, which in the opinion of respondents was a significant problem.

In the analyzed scheme of aspects of trust in the essays, the dark side of trust was less frequently interpreted as the seller's attitude than its behavior. In the case of attitude dark sides were determined mainly in the individual dimension, when in the case of behaviour, almost every aspect of trust (except for fragility) dark sides exceeded the dimension of individual actions. That indicates that sales people are focused on achieving

goals related to the development of relationships, looking at the relationship through the perspective of the sales team and managing conflicts from the point of view of the possibility of developing a relationship (Weigt and Bradford, 1999). In this the exception is the aspect of trust defined as *interlocked with other dimensions of relationship*, for which the authors of the essays associated the dark side of trust only with the attitude to work and to the customer and did not describe this aspect of trust in the context of their actions. This may indicate that relationship is understood in line with Wood and colleagues (2008) as an attitude to a customer based on trust, commitment and satisfaction.

There are clear-cut definitions of individual and organizational trust (Fulmar and Gelfand, 2012), the tradition of separating these dimensions is well-established. However, the data discussed indicate that respondents do not distinguish them so clearly. The aspects of trust mentioned in the essays in the context of its dark sides already point to a blurred individual and organizational trust. We have also observed that particular aspects of trust have a negative impact on the attitude of the seller in the individual, organizational or relational dimension (with the exception of fragility and blurred individual and organizational trust). That means that the boundary between individual, organizational and relational trust which emerges in seller's biased work-life balance, is blurred. Such an approach is seldom adopted in the concepts emphasizing the role of trust in sales. They place the seller at the centre of attention, emphasize his role as a boundary spanner, and therefore sellers attribute building trust in customer relationships (Jolson 1997, Liu and Leach 2001, Chonko and Jones 2005). Even if the seller builds trust with the customer individually, he also interprets the dark side of trust in the organizational dimension, which is consistent with the demands of Weitz and Bradford (1999) concerning the need to look at relational sales including the sales team and not the individual sellers.

Trust generates not only positive and negative consequences in the individual and organizational dimension, but also in the organizational dimension and relationships. Perception of dark sides through the prism of the relationship is less often noticed in sales management, but it finds strong emphasis in relational



stream publications. Individual trust is related to the trust of other people involved in working with the customer. Sales people participating in the research realize, that in interactions with the customer they are not a lonely island (Håkansson and Snehota 2017; Guenzi et al., 2007). There is a vivid awareness of the dependence of trust on the customer's actions and attitudes, which can be attributed to the customer orientation of the respondents (Weck and Ivanova, 2013).

Analyzing the results presented in Table 2, it can be observed that the author's interpretations occur in one or several fields of the table. However, there are no authors whose interpretations would appear in many fields. Therefore the analysis of essays in Table 2 does not give grounds for concluding about the impact of a specific relationship of the seller on its activities. That results from the character of particular essays which enclosed stories and interpretations of the dark sides of trust described in most cases by attitude or behaviour but rarely both. Those stories and interpretations were strongly embedded in the context and therefore unique.

## CONCLUSIONS

By discussing the topic of the dark side of trust we contribute to existing literature in several areas. First, we suggest that trust has a dual nature. Trust is intrinsically good or bad and may lead to both positive and negative consequences (Thorgren and Wincent, 2011), which may be interpreted differently and lead to various consequences depending on the market situation, the nature of a relationship between the seller and his customer and other factors (Abosag et al., 2016). Trust is not the only element that characterizes a relationship and its negative aspects can be tolerated or even remain unseen. The sole aim was to identify dark sides of trust, therefore a problem of their gradation and influence on sales may constitute another research problem.

Second, based on the dark sides of trust identified during the literary and empirical review, we propose a multi-level analysis that considers the attitudes and behaviors of the sellers. Such an approach to the problem supplements and organizes the fragmented knowledge present in the literature. It is consistent with a multi-level approach to trust and to the work of the seller and its support by the organization.

Third, research confirmed the complex nature of trust, which is interdependent with other elements of the business relationship, multidimensional and interpenetrating with private trust. Its selected aspects can lead to differentiated dark sides, but we were not able to capture clear, one-way dependencies, because the respondents pointing to the same dark sides combined them with different sources. This confirms the interpretive character of trust.

Fourth, showing the seller's perspective in order to describe challenges related to trust is a rare approach in the literature, where it is the buyer that is seen as the trusting side and the seller is mainly perceived as the one building trust. Meanwhile, sellers as boundary spanners trust their customers and thus are vulnerable to their behaviours and have certain expectations. The dark sides of trust may make the relationship between the seller and the buyer worse. This means that relational selling based on building trust within the buyer/seller will not necessarily mean delivering anticipated, long-term, value-added benefits to buyers.

## MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS

Our research and the final conclusions lead to managerial implications for sellers and sales managers. By adopting the strategy of relational selling, salespeople should accept the fact that negative aspects appear alongside the positive aspects of trust. However, tacit downsides of trust may not be noticed and without relevant and quick reactions they will contribute to the worsening of processes (e.g. rigidity of a relationship, meeting the other party's rising expectations, replacing business-like relationships with friendly ones (Yang et al., 2012)) and atmosphere (eg. risk of slavery relationship, relational inertia) (Gargiulo and Benassi, 2000), relational isolation (Gulati, 1995) and rising expectations on the part of the customer as well as decreased vigilance that stems from the closeness to the customer (Zahra, Yavuz and Ucbasaran, 2006) in a relationship with the customer. Hence the seller should strive to assess the relationship objectively and determine its influence on their task performance. Even a high degree of mutual trust in a relationship with the customer may lead to substantial negative consequences for sales. In this situation it is advisable to assess how negative consequences influence the value of the customer.

From the viewpoint of sales management it is necessary to regularly monitor seller attitudes and behaviors in order to control and eliminate dark sides of trust in case they appear by raising awareness amongst sellers in the area. Training, individual work with coaches and monitoring sellers' fieldwork and constant monitoring of their activities based on CRM systems may prove a useful tool. Another conclusion concerns the management of customers and their evaluation not only through "hard data", but also extending it to include issues related to the assessment of the relationship, including trust and possible negative sides of the phenomenon.

The last conclusion is associated with the postulate of Gargiulo and Ertug (2006), who see the dark sides of trust as directly related to the erroneous evaluations performed by the seller. Because trust may mean that the assessment of the customer will concentrate on the relational aspects and obscure the rational reasons for the assessment of the customer, introducing objective measurement assessment tools and decreasing the importance of the opinion that the seller has of the customer may prove an efficient solution.

## **LIMITATIONS AND EXTENSIONS**

The research conducted has two important limitations that need to be considered while analysing the data obtained. Firstly, the subjects of the research were sales people with professional experience in managing business-to-business sales. This probably translates into their high awareness of business relationships with the customer and the role of trust, which could have had a significant impact on the result. Such a homogeneous group allows for only one point of view. Furthermore the recorded statements of managers were strongly embedded in the history of a given relationship, usually complex and long-lasting. Therefore the exploratory character of the research should be remembered, bearing in mind the possibility of the incidental character of individual examples. Qualitative study among the sales or key account managers could apply to development of a more complete picture of the phenomenon.

Secondly, the essay method used in data collection allowed the collection of interesting results. The essays allowed the authors free discourse which they fully controlled. However, due to the lack of interaction

with the researcher, it does not allow the possibility to deepen or clarify selected issues. Certain issues in the essays were discussed with varying diligence and detail, which was beyond the control of the researcher.

To sum up, the aim of our research was to explore the phenomenon of the dark side of trust from the perspective of the seller. This approach differs significantly from most of the works in the field of the role of trust in seller-buyer relationships, which emphasize the positive effects of trust on the seller's performance. Further work is clearly needed to explore the scope and forms of the phenomena observed and to develop precise measurement tools to identify flaws of trust and determine their impact on the relationship with the buyer and the effects achieved from this relationship.

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## APPENDIX A

Respondent	Business characteristics/ Industry	Size of the company (number of employees)
R1	Service company (medical industry)	200
R2	Service company (consulting)	20000
R3	Service company (heating industry)	300
R4	Trading company (publishing industry)	30
R5	Service company (BPO)	40
R6	Service company (utility)	200
R7	Production company (automotive industry)	104
R8	Trading company (cosmetics industry)	250
R9	Service company (IT)	18
R10	Production company (construction industry)	200
R11	Service company (MICE)	7
R12	Production company (furniture industry)	5500
R13	Production company (poultry production)	300
R14	Production company (charcoal production)	No data available
R15	Trading company (logistics)	600
R16	Production company (paper industry)	150
R17	Trading company (installation industry)	25

**APPENDIX A (CONTINUED)**

Respondent	Business characteristics/ Industry	Size of the company (number of employees)
R18	Production company (medical industry)	600
R19	Production company (IT)	1500
R20	Production company (medical industry)	No data available
R21	Production company (chemical industry)	3000
R22	Production company (industry sector)	130
R23	Trading company (FMCG)	No data available
R24	Production company (glass manufacturer)	400
R25	Service company (financial industry)	No data available
R26	Production company (wood industry)	100
R27	Trading company (IT)	50
R28	Trade company (food industry)	30
R29	Service company (network operator)	16500
R30	Production company (agricultural enterprise)	75
R31	Service company (e-commerce)	80
R32	Trade company (agricultural machinery)	6