Global sales training: In search of antecedent, mediating, and consequence variables

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Abstract

This study proposes a framework that identifies and explains the relationships of input, mediating, and output variables for global sales training programs. Input or antecedent variables include high-quality: determination of sales training needs, objective setting, designing/implementing the training program, and evaluating training outcomes. The mediating variable culture is measured by a latent indicator: managers’ perceived importance/perceived adequacy. The output or consequence variable is the quantitative improvement a firm measures in sales force performance that results from global sales training in the form of increases in sales revenue, profitability, decreased customer complaints, and/or reduced selling expenses. This framework is an initial attempt to synthesize existing knowledge about how to conduct effective sales training programs in cross-cultural settings. The article also offers research propositions that can be tested to advance our understanding of global sales training, discusses managerial implications, identifies limitations encountered by global sales training practitioners, and suggests future study opportunities for researchers.

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1. Introduction

Organizations invest significant time, money, and effort developing, conducting, and assessing sales training programs. For example, U.S. firms devote an estimated 33 h annually training the average salesperson (Lorge & Smith, 1998) and this investment increases to 73 days for entry-level sales representatives (Kaydo, 1998). In 2000, $56.8 billion were invested in training (Galvin, 2001) of which one-quarter or $14.2 billion were devoted to sales training (Wilson, Strutton, & Farris, 2002). Global firms believe that investing in sales training programs contribute positively to sales force motivation (Liu, 1996), effectiveness (Piercy, Craven, & Morgan, 1998), and performance (Pelham, 2002).

The role that effective sales training plays in a firm’s strategic advantage extends from home country to global business environments (Honeycutt, Ford, & Simintiras, 2003). As a result, global powerhouses like Canon, Wyeth Pharmaceuticals, and Saab invest sales training dollars across national borders (Hall, 2005).

The need to train salespeople cross-nationally is driven by: (1) different cultural perspectives possessed by overseas sales team members that global firms must socialize and educate (Ling, Floyd, & Baldridge, 2005); (2) distinct cultural expectations by buyers in different nations when conducting personal selling activities (Hill, Still, & Boya, 1991; Honeycutt, Ford, & Kurtzman, 1996); and (3) changes in business practices wrought by the events of September 11, 2001. That is, after 9/11 global sales training efforts were overtaken by negative forces that included: plunging stock prices, tighter security, and increased expense and risk of traveling. In response, sales managers had to
r rethink the training model and this led to the adoption of web-based training and teleconferencing as realistic alternatives. As a result of these three uncontrollable forces, global firms must offer training programs that are flexible and appropriate for distinct cultures (Selmer, 2000), while supporting sales strategies that lead to successful operations (Forster, 2000).

Despite existing research, little effort has been made to develop either quantitative or qualitative determinants of effective global sales training (Honeycutt, Ford & Rao, 1995). One explanation for the current level of understanding about global sales training is our limited understanding of culture. That is, sales managers and researchers need a deeper understanding of how culture influences their ability to plan, implement, and control sales training programs. Simply stated, culture is the way in which a group solves problems and reconciles dilemmas (Hofstede, 1991).

The purpose of this article is to synthesize the existing body of international sales training literature into an initial global sales training framework. First, a literature review is conducted that identifies, organizes, and integrates input or antecedent, mediating, and output or consequence variables into a global sales training framework. Second, the impact of culture is represented by the mediating variable perceived importance/perceived adequacy. This means that managers in different cultures perceive how to plan, implement, and control sales training based upon their view of the world. Third, the consequence variable is the objective improvement in performance that results from global sales training. Fourth, research propositions are stated that offer direction for advancing our understanding of the relationships among antecedent, mediating, and consequence variables and explain the effectiveness of global sales training programs. Lastly, we proffer managerial implications, potential limitations researchers may encounter when conducting cross-cultural research, and suggestions for future research.

2. An integrative framework for global sales training programs

The growing body of knowledge in the area of global sales training is presented as a framework in Fig. 1. The model, as explained below, consists of three stages: antecedent, mediating, and consequence variables.

- **Antecedent variables** – refer to how effectively the sales training program is assessed, planned, conducted, and evaluated. As shown, four antecedent inputs feed into the mediating and consequence stages. Antecedent variables include: assessing sales training needs, setting sales training objectives, carrying out the training plan, and evaluating the outcome of the training program. The basic premise is that when sales training programs are correctly planned and implemented, there is a higher probability that sales managers will observe improved firm performance (Dubinsky, Mehta & Anderson, 2001; Pelham, 2002).

- **Mediating variable** – defined as perceived importance/perceived adequacy of training by sales managers. Sales managers that are born and raised in distinct cultures perceive and behave differently (Bond & Smith, 1996); thus, managers from different cultures are likely to believe that certain topical areas and training methods are most important and that certain skills, knowledge, and behaviors are “adequate” for success in the local marketplace (Dubinsky, 1981). In Malaysia, multinational sales managers offered market-oriented sales training programs in contrast to local managers that identified product knowledge as the most important training focus for their sales trainees (Jantan & Honeycutt, 2002).

- **Consequence variable(s)** – are objective improvements observed by managers after salespersons complete a training program. Sales force improvement metrics include increases in sales revenue, profits, and number of new customers or by decreases in buyer complaints or lost customers. Extrinsic variables, such as competitor actions, economic variations, and technological developments, can influence the precision of a consequence variable (Attia, Honeycutt & Attia, 2002). Therefore, an outcome or consequence variable is easier to measure when it is aligned with training program objectives and firms match and evaluate salespersons within geographical territories (Cavusgil, 1990).

3. Global sales training variables

Decisions about standardizing or localizing sales training programs are based upon how centralized or decentralized the global firm is and the types of skills parent firms want to impart to their sales reps (Hill et al., 1991). Firms would prefer to have training centers located in major overseas locations, but this is not economically feasible. As a compromise, firms send experts abroad to provide training for their sales personnel that is modified for local conditions (Geber, 1989). Global companies must adapt to local culture when teaching soft competencies like supervisory or communication skills. Conversely, standardized training content and instructional methods work best when imparting technical knowledge (Funakawa, 1997).

Existing sales training studies primarily compare and contrast the practices of local and global companies in Saudi Arabia (Erffmeyer, Al-khatib, Al-Habib & Hair, 1993), China and
Slovakia (Honeycutt, Ford, Lupton & Flaherty, 1999), Malaysia (Jantan & Honeycutt, 2002; Jantan, Honeycutt, Thelen & Attia, 2004), and Singapore (Honeycutt, Mottnner, & Ahmed, 2005). Other studies address sales training and negotiations in a geographical region – Northern vs. Southern European (Roman & Ruiz, 2003), by sales training methods (high tech vs. low tech methods) in Malaysia (Honeycutt, Karande & Jantan, 2002) or by evaluating sales training with utility analysis in Egypt (Honeycutt, Karande, Attia & Maurer, 2001). Each article is summarized in Table 1.

The following subsections discuss the antecedent, mediating, and consequence variables that lead to sales training effectiveness in the global environment.

3.1. Assessing sales training needs

Assessment is the diagnostic part of the sales training process that seeks to identify gaps that may exist between salesperson deficiencies and the skills, knowledge, and attitudes necessary for success (Anderson, 1993; Dubinsky & Barry, 1982). To be effective, sales training must be aligned with organizational change and understood within a strategic context (Attia, Honeycutt & Leach, 2005). Although selling activities may appear to be universal, the unique needs of sales representatives vary between cultures in the local selling environment: customs, methods, and strategies (Kallet, 1981). Sales training needs are most often identified through the judgment of sales/upper management, interviews with salespersons/customers, analyses of performance measures, and organizational/sales goals and objectives (Erffmeyer, Russ & Hair, 1991).

Global companies conduct more systematic needs assessment of their sales force than do local firms. For example, in Malaysia global firms reported needs assessment methods that were more specific, measurable, and that were employed to set training objectives (Jantan & Honeycutt, 2002). Training providers must determine training needs that solve participant problems, help identify suitable technology and training methods for different educational levels (Erffmeyer, Russ & Hair, 1992), collect trainee profiles, and understand sales trainee socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds (Huang, 1996).

3.2. Sales training objectives setting

After assessing sales training needs, it is necessary to establish specific training objectives before designing and implementing the sales training program. Simply put, objectives are statements of what will be accomplished through sales training. When objectives are aligned with strategic organizational objectives and

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**Table 1**

Summary of empirical international sales training studies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Authors (year)</th>
<th>Countries</th>
<th>Sample size</th>
<th>Significant findings</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Saudi Arabia</td>
<td>67 salespersons</td>
<td>– Duration, content, and philosophies differed by country</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>– Saudi training shorter in duration and more product-focused</td>
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<tr>
<td>Honeycutt et al. (1999)</td>
<td>China</td>
<td>51 (24 global, 27 local)</td>
<td>– Length of training – 13 days in global Chinese firms</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Slovakia</td>
<td>74 (22 global, 52 local)</td>
<td>– Local: Shortest in China = 8; Slovakia = 12</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>– Local: product focus; Global: market orientation</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>– Global firms evaluate and control training at higher levels</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>– Demonstrated utility analysis using evaluation inputs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Honeycutt et al. (2001)</td>
<td>Egypt</td>
<td>79 trainees</td>
<td>– Benefits of sales training depend upon: retention, difference between trained/untrained, performance level, and length of time training lasts</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>– Global firms practice higher levels of need determination</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jantan and Honeycutt (2002)</td>
<td>Malaysia</td>
<td>52 global firms</td>
<td>– Local firms focus on minimizing training costs</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>53 local firms</td>
<td>– Global firms – demonstration; Local firms – OJT</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>105 total firms</td>
<td>– Global firms – market info; Local firms – product info</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>– Global firms training twice as long – 9.4 vs. 4.5 days</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>– Firms that conduct high-tech training engage in more highly planned, conducted, and evaluated training programs</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>– Skills taught at higher level by high-tech firms</td>
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<td></td>
<td>– No difference in content and effectiveness of training</td>
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<td></td>
<td>– More OJT and own-house training in Southern Europe</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>– Culture explains sales training methods</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>– Lower instance of team work training in S. Europe</td>
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<tr>
<td>Roman and Ruiz (2003)</td>
<td>UK, Portugal, Spain, Finland, and The Netherlands</td>
<td>555 companies</td>
<td>– Global managers perceived significantly higher results from training</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>– Standardized content for product and technical information</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>59 local firms</td>
<td>– Global: managing/training sales force more important</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>105 total firms</td>
<td>– Local: evaluating sales force most important</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>– Global: viewed all training topics most important, except socialization</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>– Global: devoted more time to demonstration and participation</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>– Local: utilized higher levels of OJT</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>– Sales training part of strategic marketing plan for global firms</td>
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identified salesperson needs, deficiencies, requirements, and competencies then sales training is maximized (Attia et al., 2005). Listed below are global sales training objectives derived from global/cross-cultural research appearing over the past two decades:

- Improve sales force negotiation skills to increase successful sales encounters and long-term relationships for small/medium sized European firms (Roman & Ruiz, 2003).
- Decrease sales training costs for local firms, improve sales force control for global companies, and improve customer relations and time management for both global and local firms in Malaysia (Jantan & Honeycutt, 2002).
- Improve sales force morale, sales routing, selling skills, market share, sales volume, and competitive position in Egypt and global markets (Honeycutt et al., 2001).
- Impart effective product, selling, intercultural skills, and increase salesperson knowledge about parent companies (Keater, 1994).
- Reduce turnover rates and increase salesperson motivation levels (Shipley, 1984; Ford, 1984; Cavusgil, 1990; Liu, 1996).
- Promote communication flow between parent companies and subsidiaries related to selling and compensation policies (Anonymous, 1995).
- Build customer information systems and databases, and disseminate parent companies market orientation practices (Chonko, Tanner & Smith, 1991; Chonko, Tanner, & Weeks, 1993; Erffmeyer et al., 1993).
- Improve salesperson negotiation skills (Graham, Kim, Lin & Robinson, 1988), increase abilities to nurture and sustain long-term relationships (Ford, 1984); and help evaluate performance (quantitative/qualitative) measures (Hill & Allaway, 1993).

### 3.3. Sales training program design/implementation

Global firms must cautiously adapt and transfer training content and methods to locations abroad. For example, Geber (1989) recommended that global firms utilize local bi-cultural employees or consultants to identify gaps and cultural faux pas in training programs designed in the home country. Montago (1996) discussed how Korean trainers met with their U.S. managers and then modified the training concepts and ideas to address local cultural conditions. Jantan and Honeycutt (2002) reported that global firms in Malaysia translated training manuals, used joint headquarters/local trainers, and selected/integrated training methods to minimize cultural barriers. Also, different training methods were necessary to transfer salesperson negotiation skills/behaviors in northern European (UK, Netherlands, and Finland) and southern European (Spain and Portugal) countries because these two groups of nations exhibit distinct cultural characteristics (Roman & Ruiz, 2003).

In Singapore, local and global hotel training programs offered different program content, levels of demonstration, and in-class participation. Global firms also incorporated sales training into their strategic marketing plan (Honeycutt et al., 2005). Global firm sales managers in Malaysia, in contrast to their local counterparts, reported significant improvement in salesperson performance (sales presentation, communication, technical, and customer relations skills) after completing sales training (Jantan et al., 2004).

Global companies employ a higher level of demonstration methods, while local firms use on-the-job (OJT) training methods (Honeycutt et al., 2005; Jantan & Honeycutt, 2002). In empirical studies conducted in Saudi Arabia (Erffmeyer et al., 1993), Singapore (Honeycutt et al., 2001), Malaysia (Jantan & Honeycutt, 2002), and Slovakia (Honeycutt et al., 1999), the sales training content of global companies consistently focused on market and customer information, in contrast to product knowledge for local firms. Also, ethical sales issues were significantly more prevalent in global sales training programs in Singapore (Honeycutt et al., 2005).

Other issues that can affect sales training program content and methods include: translation problems (Kallet, 1981; Honeycutt et al., 1996), industry and corporate culture-related issues (Keater, 1994, 1995), parent firm market orientation (Cavusgil, 1990; Erffmeyer et al., 1993; Honeycutt et al., 1999), and technological capability (Flynn, 1987; Zeira & Pazy, 1985). Additionally global companies, in contrast to local firms, devote greater resources – in the form of time, effort, and money – to train new sales representatives (Honeycutt et al., 2001; Jantan & Honeycutt, 2002; Honeycutt et al., 1999). To minimize cultural mistakes, global firms must carefully select, adapt, and balance their training delivery methods across cultures.

### 3.4. Sales training program evaluation

In the global marketplace, sales training planning and implementation are often perceived to be of greater importance than attempts to evaluate (Erffmeyer et al., 1991; Erffmeyer et al., 1993; El-Ansary, 1993). Possible explanations for evaluation’s diminished status include negative managerial perceptions, lack of empirical evidence, evaluation restrictions, and methodological problems (Attia et al., 2002).

International companies in Singapore viewed sales training evaluation and managing the sales force to be significantly more important than local firm managers (Honeycutt et al., 2005). Scholars and training experts agree that the variability in cross-cultural training evaluation stems from cultural dispersion (Erffmeyer et al., 1993; Honeycutt et al., 1999), parent company evaluation methods (Cavusgil, 1990; Chonko et al., 1991; Greber, 1993), industry effect, level of market development, evaluative criteria (Hill & Allaway, 1993), and lack of salesperson accountability for change (Miller & Sinkovitz, 2005).

Sales training is normally evaluated at one or more levels: reaction, learning, attitude, and/or results (Kirkpatrick, 1959). Training program evaluation can assume two roles: formative or summative. Formative evaluation provides input for improving the training program, while summative evaluation efforts consider the value of the training investment (Scriven, 1991). Evaluating a training program through reaction and/or knowledge level transfer is conducted for formative reasons (Leach & Liu, 2003). For example, measuring trainee reaction to a training program is an easier form of evaluation that does not determine training effectiveness. Conversely, training results are more
difficult to measure, but they are viewed to be the most important summative indicator of training value (Honeycutt & Stevenson, 1989).

3.5. Culture as a mediating variable

Cultural experts have defined national culture in more than 100 different ways (Kroeber and Kluckhohn, 1952). In spite of myriad definitions, Triandis (1996) provides a widely accepted definition of culture:

shared standards for perceiving, believing, evaluating, communicating, and acting among those who share a language, a historic period, and a geographic location (Ling et al., 2005 p. 641).

The impact of national culture on sales training is presented in Table 2.

Five dimensions of national culture utilized in this study are: context, power distance, uncertainty avoidance, individualism/collectivism, and masculinity/femininity. Hall (1976, 1987) expanded our understanding of culture by offering the dimension of context. Citizens of the U.S. and most European nations are “low context,” meaning that communication is more detailed and explicit. Conversely, citizens in many Asian nations – Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan – employ “high context” characteristics whereby individuals read body language and nuances to gain a fuller meaning of interpersonal communications. When members of a nation are homogeneous in culture and socio-economic factors, higher levels of communication and especially word of mouth and imitation occur (Takada & Jain, 1991; Jain & Maesincee, 1995).

Hofstede (1980) proposed four components of national culture that are important to understanding international sales training. Power distance refers to the acceptance of a hierarchical structure in a society. This means that members of a culture accept that certain people are superior and social interactions revolve around a person’s status. Power distance impacts how trainees are taught and the interactions between salesperson and buyer in a culture. Uncertainty avoidance focuses upon the way a society deals with risk and impacts how sales managers perceive important aspects of a sales call. For example, in Japan salespersons must understand the buying process and that role must be precisely followed. Conversely, there is low uncertainty avoidance in the U.S. and salespersons are trained to adapt their behavior to find a successful way to conclude a sale. Individualism/collectivism is a component of national culture that centers on the importance of the group in contrast to an individual. In a sales situation, this component influences the length of time the buyer takes to form relationships and make decisions. Masculinity/femininity is the fourth characteristic Hofstede proposed and deals with traits valued by society. In masculine cultures like Japan, Austria, and Mexico strength, success, confidence, and competitiveness are stressed. In the feminine cultures of Sweden, Denmark, and Thailand the values of relationship building, compassion, and quality of life are deemed more important. Masculinity/femininity impacts negotiations and relationships in B2B sales situations (Honeycutt et al., 2003). Thus, these five cultural components can influence the perceived importance of material taught, who instructs, the methods employed to transfer learning, and how managers evaluate the adequacy of training.

3.5.1. Diffusion of innovation

When interacting with overseas sales offices or partners, global sales managers must possess a comprehensive understanding of cultural characteristics to successfully innovate new training concepts or innovations into that market. This is because firms control content and delivery training factors, while cultural factors remain uncontrollable (Takada & Jain, 1991). An innovation is defined as: “an idea, practice, or object perceived as new by an individual” (Rogers & Shoemaker, 1971). Cross-national variations in diffusion of innovations occur when countries/cultures adopt ideas at different rates – creating a “lead–lag effect”. Thus, to plan and implement successful

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 2</th>
<th>Five distinct levels of national culture</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Power distance – the extent to which members of a culture accept unequal distribution of power. Some cultures accept larger power distances between members of society or the organization, which impacts personal relationships. In other words, in societies with high power distances parties involved in social interactions view themselves as being either equal or unequal. The level of power distance defines the roles played by members of that society; for example, between instructor and student. In high power distance societies, therefore, it may be difficult for training programs to require close interaction between the instructor and trainee. Trainees may expect one-way communications – from instructor to participant. In such situations, class participation will be viewed to be inappropriate.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Uncertainty avoidance – defines how society deals with ambiguity. The higher the level of perceived ambiguity, the greater the need to reduce uncertainty. In Japan, Greece, and Portugal, details have to be clearly stated and all eventualities prepared for before proceeding with business. In other cultures, like Singapore, Denmark, or Sweden, there is less fear of uncertainty. This cultural dimension can influence training programs by limiting the amount of freedom the trainer and trainees have to deviate from a planned program or activity. Instruction in these cultures will be more formal and ritualistic.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Individualism/Collectivism – means that some cultures are more group-oriented in their decision process. For example, in the U.S. Individualism is a major component of culture as seen by the use of the cowboy as the “ Marlboro Man®.” But, in other countries, especially in Asia, group cohesion and safety are important aspects of all business activities. Thus, training conducted in highly collectivistic countries will find trainees that are reluctant to perform at a higher level than their classmates. There is an old Japanese proverb: “the nail that sticks up gets hammered down,” that provides insight about individualism in that culture.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Masculinity/Femininity – describes the traits valued by a society. Masculine traits that are seen include strength, success, and confidence. Feminine traits encompass nurturing, building relationships, and improving one’s quality of life. In masculine cultures individuals view wealth building as a primary goal, while these traits are not as important in feminine cultures. In highly masculine cultures, trainees are more likely to be competitive and less likely to cooperate for the good of the class.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Context – focuses on explicitness of communication. In cultures with low context, like the U.S. and European nations, communication is detailed and explicit. This concept is evident in western legal contracts that spell out every conceivable detail and contingency that may arise. High context cultures tend to communicate less precisely in words, with the participants gaining a greater understanding through shared beliefs, body language, and voice tone. Most Asian and Middle Eastern cultures are considered high context. Salespersons must understand how buyers from different cultures communicate in order to minimize misunderstandings.</td>
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innovation is reduced and diffusion accelerates in the lag nation. New ideas are successful in a lead country, the risk associated with the learning effect will be for new ideas. For example, when a culturally similar lead and lag countries/cultures are aware of or have not embraced the concept or idea. The stronger which a concept of idea originates; while lag cultures are not significantly influenced consequence variables (Ling et al., 2005; adequacy. Thus, culture serves as a mediating variable that signifies the importance/perceived adequacy. From a measurement perspective, the cultural construct is viewed as a latent variable that is measured by an observable, reflective indicator: perceived importance/adequacy. Thus, culture serves as a mediating variable that significantly influences consequence variables (Ling et al., 2005; Erffmeyer et al., 1993; Honeycutt et al., 1999). One way that culture mediates sales training transfer is through managers’ perceived importance/perceived adequacy of training.

3.5.2. Psychometric properties
When examining construct validity and measurement issues, criteria or guidelines are proposed for determining whether mediating variables are formative or reflective (MacKenzie, Podsakoff & Jarvis, 2005; Jarvis, MacKenzie & Podsakoff, 2003). In Fig. 1 culture is a higher-order construct that represents the latent variable to a reflective indicator: perceived importance/adequacy. From a measurement perspective, the cultural construct is viewed as a latent variable that is measured by an unobservable, reflective indicator: perceived importance/adequacy. Thus, culture serves as a mediating variable that significantly influences consequence variables (Ling et al., 2005; Erffmeyer et al., 1993; Honeycutt et al., 1999). One way that culture mediates sales training transfer is through managers’ perceived importance/perceived adequacy of training.

3.5.3. Perceived importance/perceived adequacy
The perceived importance/perceived adequacy variable defines “how well prepared salespeople are on certain elements in the personal selling process” (Dubinsky, 1980, p. 49); but, perceptions are moderated by distinct cultural beliefs. For example, in cultures that rate high in uncertainty avoidance, sales training places a greater emphasis on understanding and following the customer buying process than in low uncertainty avoidance cultures. Therefore, the cultural influence of perceived importance/perceived adequacy must be considered when planning, conducting, and controlling global sales training programs since “the perceptual lens associated with culture influence[s] individuals’ perceptions of situational factors...” (Ling et al., 2005 p. 641).

As highlighted in Sections 3.1 (needs assessment) through 3.4 (evaluation), significant differences exist between the practices of local and global sales training programs. Different cultures require local preparation input across all stages of the sales training process. That is, the methods, techniques, criteria, skills, and practices selected to prepare the salesperson for success are based upon what managers in a culture consider important. So perceived adequacy of sales training, or how well the training program prepares sales people on specific personal selling process elements in a given culture, influences sales managers’ perceptions of sales force improvement (Jantan et al., 2004).

For instance global companies that are located in high collectivist cultures, like Japan and Thailand, view sales training programs to be most effective when sales managers work closely and collectively – to sustain communal value – implementing training activities with their sales reps. Conversely global firms that are located in highly individualistic societies, like the U.S. and Canada, perceive their sales training programs to be effective when sales representatives can work independently with minimal supervision – to uphold personal values, develop self confidence, and stimulate individual creativity (Jantan & Honeycutt, 2002). Thus, international scholars should define and measure this mediating variable to capture the impact of culture when assessing the effectiveness of global sales training programs (Dubinsky, Micheal, Kotabe, Lim & Moon, 1992).

3.6. Performance improvement resulting from sales training
The sales training consequence variable is the measured improvement in performance resulting from sales training. Huge investments in sales training and development justify calculating a return on investment (ROI), whenever possible. Performance can be measured at two levels: the individual or trainee level (e.g., gains in salesperson knowledge, morale, and/or job satisfaction) and at the overall firm level (e.g., increase in sales volume, market share, profit, or decrease in selling expenses). Measuring individual performance allows the company to understand which trainees benefited the most or least from the sales training program, but individual trainee gains are more difficult to document because of unknown influences like competitor actions, weather, and poor product match up (Honeycutt & Stevenson, 1989).

When performance is measured at the organizational level the company can assess its training program and strategy; thus, permitting the refinement of future training and development plans. Firm level training outcomes, in the form of quantitative measures, are the most tangible and objective measures of training effectiveness, but they are the most difficult evaluations to perform (Lupton, Weiss & Peterson, 1999). However, given these potential problems, Caterpillar evaluated their partner training program by comparing dealers that received training (experimental group) against a randomly selected non-trained (control) group of dealers. This was accomplished by conducting quantitative comparisons of sales revenue, net revenue per sales call, market share increases, lost sales, and impact on new product sales to confirm training success. Based upon trainee reaction to the training program and quantitative changes in firm performance, Caterpillar made adjustments in training “systems or strategies” (Cavusgil, 1990, p.7).

4. Future research agenda
To facilitate future research efforts, ten research propositions are listed below. This is followed by limitations researchers face in the marketplace, managerial implications, and suggestions for future research.
4.1. Research propositions

Research has shown that effective needs assessment activities (Erfmeyer et al., 1991; Attia et al., 2005), inter-departmental coordination of objective setting (Honeycutt & Stevenson, 1989; Honeycutt, Howe & Ingram, 1993; Honeycutt, Ford & Tanner, 1994), selecting proper training methods and content (e.g., Honeycutt, Harris & Castleberry, 1987; Honeycutt et al., 1993) and adopting higher level evaluation techniques (Kirkpatrick, 1959; Lupton et al., 1999; Honeycutt et al., 2001; Leach & Liu, 2003), positively improves both salesperson and firm performance (Pelham, 2002).

Current domestic and international sales training research concludes that effective sales training needs assessment, objective setting, program implementation, and evaluation are significant elements that result in improved firm performance. In effect, Propositions 1 through 4 are the main effects of the model and warrant further testing of perceived improvement of performance in the international environment:

**Proposition 1.** The more effectively needs assessment practices are implemented, the higher the performance of the sales force in the global environment as a result of sales training.

**Proposition 2.** The more effectively sales training objective setting practices are implemented, the higher the performance of the sales force in the global environment as a result of sales training.

**Proposition 3.** The more effectively sales training is implemented, the higher the performance of the sales force in the global environment as a result of sales training.

**Proposition 4.** The more effectively sales training practices are evaluated, and this information is used to improve succeeding training programs, the higher the performance of the sales force in the global environment.

Culture plays a significant role in how global and local firms conduct business because culture mediates or influences the planning, implementing, and controlling of global sales training practices. As a result, the mediating variable culture influences managerial perceptions of perceived importance/perceived adequacy of training programs (Dubinsky, 1981). That is, culture influences the importance of skills, knowledge, and behaviors taught in sales training programs, and the perceived adequacy of the level trainees are expected to perform, training methods employed, and managerial satisfaction with training results.

Dubinsky (1981, 1992) recommended that scholars and researchers define and measure perceived adequacy to capture the influence of culture on sales training program effectiveness of multinational corporations. As a result, Propositions 5 through 8 are postulated for further testing in the global environment:

**Proposition 5.** The perceived importance and perceived adequacy of needs assessment practices and findings are mediated by cultural beliefs.

**Proposition 6.** The perceived importance and perceived adequacy of level and specificity of sales training objective setting practices are mediated by cultural beliefs.

**Proposition 7.** The perceived importance and perceived adequacy of planning and implementing sales training programs are mediated by cultural beliefs.

**Proposition 8.** The perceived importance and perceived adequacy of evaluating sales training and utilizing the results of evaluation to improve future sales training activities is mediated by cultural beliefs.

Efforts have been made over the years to better understand the benefits of effective sales training programs; however, the impact of perceived adequacy in improving performance that result from sales training has received limited attention (Jantan and Honeycutt, 2002). Perceived adequacy of sales training programs differs between cultures (Dubinsky et al., 1992), which leads to differing perceptions of performance improvement across cultures (Jantan & Honeycutt, 2002). Thus, Proposition 9 states:

**Proposition 9.** The greater the perceived adequacy toward overall sales training programs (need determination, objective setting, implementation, and evaluation), the higher the perceived improvement in performance that results from sales training in a given culture.

Lastly, new ideas diffuse at a faster rate when a country is comprised of citizens that share similar cultural beliefs and socio-economic status (Takada & Jain, 1991). There are also variations of diffusion of innovations between “lead” (early adopter) and “lag” (late adopter) countries/cultures. A major determinant of these categories is the time required for new ideas and concepts to diffuse through existing communication systems (Rogers, 1983). Studies show that diffusion of innovation accelerates when a lead partner introduces an idea into a similar lag country (Ganesh et al., 1997; Jain & Maesincee, 1995). Thus, the final propositions state:

**Proposition 10a.** The speed of training adoption in nations characterized by high context culture and homophilous communication is greater than in countries with low context culture and heterophilous communication.

**Proposition 10b.** The greater cultural similarity between lead and lag markets, the stronger will be the learning effect.

4.2. Research limitations

Sales managers must understand the limitations that are likely to be encountered when conducting global sales training research. In developing nations firms may be reluctant to share highly confidential information (e.g., key performance indicators like sales and profits) and lower response rates are the norm when studying cross-cultural sales management practices (Baldwin, 1994; Kotler, Ang, Leong & Tan, 1996).
Also, failure to employ rigorous statistical techniques, such as control groups, longitudinal designs, and experimental designs in cross-cultural research (Black and Mendenhall, 1990), results in limited empirical research findings that are inconsistent with proposed theory development (Attia et al., 2002). When testing the validity of a proposed framework or model, it is advisable to utilize parsimonious models (like Fig. 1) to account for the “fit indices” of local cultural environments.

Though challenging, the advantages of conducting additional cross-cultural sales training research far outweighs potential negative consequences (Flynn, 1987; Dubinsky, 1996). Additional research efforts can lead to new research perspectives, like developing valid international sales training measurement scales that extend beyond classic global firm decisions: i.e., the standardization or localization of sales management/training activities (Porter, 1986). Future research should examine how the selling situation impacts both the operation and relationships of salespersons working in missionary, industrial, and consumer roles and how flexible the proposed model is for different sales positions.

4.3. Managerial implications

The framework shown in Fig. 1 provides sales managers and researchers with guidance for understanding global sales training decisions and provides an opportunity for further theoretical refinement of effective sales training programs in global settings. Delivering quality sales training programs, whether global or domestic in nature, depend upon how effectively each training program is assessed, planned, conducted, and evaluated. A major difficulty occurs when firms provide trainees in one setting. Delivering quality sales training programs, whether global or domestic in nature, depend upon how effectively each training program is assessed, planned, conducted, and evaluated. A major difficulty occurs when firms provide trainees in one culture — that share a distinct language, historic period experience, or geographical location — with a learning situation that was conceived and designed in a different culture.

This study offers compelling evidence that significant differences exist in sales training practices around the globe. For example, what is taught varies by culture and by level of national development related to economic ability to fund training-edge training. In the developing nations of Saudi Arabia, China, and Malaysia, trainees were exposed primarily to product knowledge. Also, training programs in developing nations rely more upon on-the-job training, while emphasizing less in-class participation, product demonstration, and selling methods. While not specifically investigated, such training practices appear to limit the effectiveness of sales training efforts in developing nations.

What is still not fully understood is why companies around the world train their sales forces differently. The logical assumption is that training programs differ based upon local cultural beliefs and practices. However, other potential influences on perceived adequacy of training programs include timeliness of material, effectiveness of training techniques, and individual trainer skills. Managers can address each of these non-cultural factors by insuring training materials are regularly updated, observing classroom sessions, and insuring summative evaluation is conducted in the form of trainee reaction to the effectiveness of instruction and trainer skills. Effectiveness of training techniques can also be assessed by conducting a written or experiential knowledge exam, either at the conclusion of or during training sessions.

Finally, this study introduces the adoption of diffusion process to sales training. This concept is important for sales managers in global settings that plan, implement, and control sales training for their own and supply chain partner sales forces. Specifically, cross-cultural sales training is more likely to succeed when the program is introduced by firms in lead cultures to subsidiaries/partners located in lag cultures that are similar and when the program is adapted to local training conditions.

References

References


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