

## **CUSTOMER ORIENTATION AS A TYPE OF ABILITY TO LEARN FROM EXPERIENCE: EMPIRICAL STUDIES OF JAPANESE SALESPEOPLE**

MAKOTO MATSUO\*  
Otaru University of Commerce

### **ABSTRACT**

Although prior research on experiential learning has focused on identifying developmental experience, it has paid little attention to the effect of career stage and ability to learn from experience. The purposes of this research were to examine developmental experience at different career stages and to clarify the role of work-related beliefs in promoting experiential learning. By applying the theoretical framework of expertise research and cognitive psychology, data from Japanese real estate salespeople was analyzed. Results suggest that (1) salespeople learn mainly from job assignments rather than other people (bosses, colleagues, and customers), (2) experiential learning is activated in the latter stage (from 6 to 10 years of career), (3) customer oriented sales beliefs strengthen the relationship between past work experience and current sales performance. A discussion of the theoretical and managerial implications is presented.

### **1 INTRODUCTION**

According to previous surveys, over 70% of individual learning can be explained by work experience (McCall et al., 1988; Morrison and Brantner, 1992; Morrison and Hock, 1986). This indicates the importance of exploring the experiential learning process in a management context.

There are three viewpoints in examining experiential learning research: (1) length of experience (McDaniel et al., 1988; Schmidt et al., 1986), (2) the characteristics of developmental experience (Davies and Easterby-Smith, 1984; McCall, 1988, 1998; McCall et al., 1988; McCall and Hollenbeck, 2002; McCauley et al., 1994), and (3) individual ability to learn from experience (Ashford, 1986; Brutus et al., 2000; Spreitzer et al., 1997).

Of the three viewpoints, past research has focused primarily on the characteristics of developmental experience of successful executives. However, few studies have paid attention to experiential learning at different career stages and to the ability to learn from experience. One of the reasons is that experiential learning studies have been conducted independently from expertise research, which is a rich repository of theory on individual learning.

The purpose of this study is to explore the experiential learning process during the first 10 years of a career, and to examine the effect of work-related beliefs on experiential learning,

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\* Makoto Matsuo. Otaru University of Commerce 3-5-21 Midori, Otaru city, Hokkaido, Japan 047-8501  
Tel/fax: +81-134-27-5353 E-mail: mmatu@res.otaru-uc.jp

using data of Japanese real estate salespeople. More specifically, this study applies the '10-year rule' of expertise and the concept of metacognitive knowledge to the research framework to extend the understanding of the experiential learning process.

## **2 CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK**

### **2.1 Experiential learning**

Kolb's (1984) experiential learning model has been one of the most influential models in management learning, and has received a good deal of empirical support (Kayes, 2002; Mainemelis et al., 2002; Meyer, 2003; Vince, 1998). Based on a diverse set of theoretical traditions, including the work of John Dewey, Kurt Lewin, and Jean Piaget, he proposed a four-stage cyclical model: (1) concrete experience, (2) reflective observation, (3) abstract conceptualization, and (4) active experimentation. This suggests that immediate personal experience is the basis for observation and reflection, and these are assimilated into abstract hypotheses or concepts. Next, these hypotheses or concepts guide learners to create new experiences.

Kolb (1984) defines learning as the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience. This definition rests on six assumptions: learning is a process, not an outcome; derives from experience; requires an individual to resolve dialectically opposed demands; is holistic and integrative; requires interplay between a person and his/her environment; and results in knowledge creation (Kayes, 2002; Kolb, 1984). Dixon (1999) suggests that learning is about interpreting what we experience in the world, and that we each create our own unique interpretations, which mediate our actions.

### **2.2 Developmental work experiences**

Prior empirical studies have focused on the 'concrete experience' stage in Kolb's (1984) learning model, and investigated the features of work experiences that promote a manager's development. Davies and Easterby-Smith (1984) asked 60 managers in five different companies how they considered they had developed in the past. They found that managers develop their abilities when they are confronted with novelty that forces them to accept major changes in their perspectives, when they take tough decisions and implement them with probity, and when they had initiated their developmental moves themselves.

McCall and colleagues (McCall, 1998; McCall et al., 1988) studied successful executives, and found that specific experiences have the most developmental potential, which fall into four categories: (1) job assignments (early work experiences, first supervision, starting from scratch, turnarounds, project/task force, managing a larger scope, and line to staff switch), (2) other people (bosses and role models), (3) hardships (business mistakes, career setback, subordinate performance problems, changing jobs, and personal trauma), and (4) other (coursework and purely personal).

Reviewing previous studies on developmental experience, McCauley et al. (1994) classified them into three categories: job transitions, task-related characteristics (creating change, high level of responsibility, and nonauthority relationships), and obstacles. Based on this framework, they developed 'the Developmental Challenge Profile (DCP)' scales

consisting 15 dimensions, and found that job transitions most clearly provide managers the opportunity to try new behaviors and to be exposed to new ways of thinking.

There seems to be a consensus among researchers that managers learn through challenging job experiences that forces them to explore new things (Davies and Easterby-Smith, 1984; McCall, 1998; McCauley et al., 1994). However, developmental experiences do not guarantee success (McCall, 1998). Not all people learn equally from the same kinds of experience. There must be individual differences in ability to learn from experience.

### **2.3 Ability to learn from experience**

As Kolb's (1984) learning model suggests, managers learn through reflecting on and interpreting their experiences. However, research on the ability to learn from experience is in the formative stage (Spreitzer et al., 1997), since the number of empirical studies is limited.

In order to identify international executive potential, Spreitzer et al. (1997) developed the scale of ability to learn from experience named *Prospector*, which includes end-state competencies (knowledge and skills necessary for effective executive behavior) and the ability to learn from experience. The ‘ability to learn from experience’ scale consists of six dimensions: ‘uses feedback’, ‘cross-culturally adventurous’, ‘seeks opportunities’, ‘open to criticism’, ‘seeks feedback’, and ‘flexible’. Results show that the ‘cross-culturally adventurous’, ‘seeks opportunities’, and ‘open to criticism’ dimensions predict success with international issues. The dimensions of the ‘ability to learn from experience’ scale did not have enough predictive power for executive potential beyond the end-state dimensions.

Brutus et al. (2000) focused on the effect of organization-based self-esteem (OBSE) on the ability to learn from experience. OBSE refers to perceived value and worthiness that individuals place on themselves as organizational members. They found that high OBSE managers felt they had developed regardless of the characteristics of their jobs, while low OBSE managers felt they had developed only when they had challenging jobs. This suggests that high OBSE managers have ability to learn not only from challenging jobs but also from non-challenging jobs.

### **2.4 Expertise research**

As mentioned earlier, expertise research has been conducted independently from experiential learning research. Reviewing the past findings of expertise research, Glaser and Chi (1988) identified seven key characteristics of experts’ performances across various domains: Experts excel mainly in their own domain, perceive large meaningful patterns in their domain, are fast at performing the skills and solve problems quickly with little error, have superior short- and long-term memory, see and represent a problem at a deep level, spend a great deal of time analyzing a problem qualitatively, and have strong self-monitoring skills.

In prior research, it is also suggested that at least ten years of active involvement in a specific field is necessary for an individual to reach an international level of achievement (Ericsson, 1996, 1999; Ericsson et al., 1993; Simon and Chase, 1973). This phenomenon is called ‘the 10-year rule of necessary preparation’ (Ericsson, 1996), which has been confirmed by historical and contemporary data in traditional domains such as chess, sports,

and music. In these domains, the highest levels of observed public performance are only displayed after a minimum 10-year stage of intensive preparation.

According to Dreyfus and Dreyfus (1987), the road to becoming an expert can be divided into five stages: (1) novice, (2) advanced beginner, (3) competent, (4) proficient, and (5) expert. The expert has a deep understanding both of situations and responses. People may grow from novice to expert level through at least 10 years of experience with concrete real situations in a specific problem domain.

It should be noted, however, that 10 years of experience do not guarantee expert performance. The amount and quality of 'deliberate practice' is crucial for attaining high level of performance (Ericsson, 1996, 1999; Ericsson and Lehmann, 1996). Deliberate practice refers to training activities that include a well-defined task with an appropriate difficulty level for a particular individual, informative feedback, and opportunities for repetition and error correction (Ericsson, 1996).

The concept of 'increasingly complex microworlds' (ICM) proposed by Burton et al. (1984) is a form of deliberate practice. In this instructional framework, individuals who try to learn complex skills are exposed to a sequence of environments in which his or her tasks become increasingly complex. The ICM paradigm allows the learner to focus on and master one aspect of the complex skills.

## **2.5 Metacognitive knowledge**

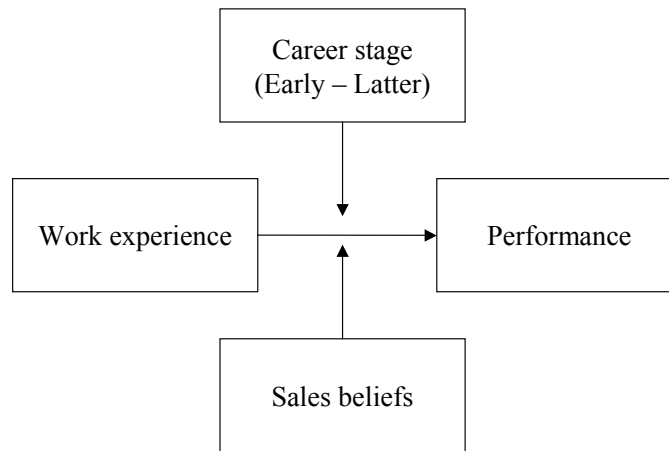
To reflect on our own experiences and learn from them, we need metacognition, or reflective capacity to engage in thinking about thinking (Jost et al., 1998). Metacognition can be classified into 'metacognitive processing' and 'metacognitive knowledge' (Flavell, 1976; Wellman, 1985). The former involves the skills of planning, monitoring, and evaluating an individual's progress during task completion, while the latter includes knowledge about task, strategy, and person (Flavell, 1976). Metacognition has shown to be related to academic achievement and problem-solving performance (Keith and Frese, 2005), and it is thought to be the basis of people's decision making (Morris, 1990). Of the two aspects of metacognition, this study focuses on work-related beliefs as metacognitive knowledge.

Based on Flavell's (1976) framework, Pintrich (2002) classified metacognitive knowledge into three types: strategic knowledge, knowledge about cognitive tasks, and self-knowledge. Strategic knowledge is knowledge of general strategies for learning, thinking, and problem solving. Knowledge about cognitive tasks is knowledge that different tasks can be more or less difficult and may require different strategies. Self-knowledge is knowledge of one's strengths and weaknesses as well as beliefs about one's motivation.

Since three types of knowledge are higher order knowledge guiding and directing individual behaviors (Nelson and Narens, 1994), they may play an important role in experiential learning. In a management context, employees must have metacognitive knowledge about the nature of the job, strategies to accomplish the job, and their own ability to cope with the job. Thus, work related beliefs on task, strategy, and self could be parts of an employee's metacognitive knowledge.

## 2.6 Research questions and hypothesis

The literature review suggests that existing research on experiential learning has focused on identifying developmental experience, but has paid little attention to the effect of career stage and ability to learn from experience. In order to investigate the effect of career stage and the role of ability to learn from experience in the experiential learning process, this study incorporates the framework of expertise research into the research model, shown in Figure 1.



**Figure 1 Research Model**

The purpose of this research was twofold: (1) to examine developmental experience at different career stages and (2) to clarify the role of work-related beliefs in promoting experiential learning. In identifying developmental experiences, the relationship between past work experiences and current sales performance was analyzed. It is assumed in this study that if past work experience is positively related to current performance, people would acquire some knowledge or skills from work experience.

Based on the 10-year rule in expertise research, this study focuses on the first 10 years of a salesperson's career, which was divided into two stages: early stage (1-5 years) and latter stage (6-10 years). People are novice and advanced beginner of Dreyfus and Dreyfus's (1987) model in the early stage, while competent and proficient in the latter stage, although there need not be rigorous correspondence. In order to explore developmental experience in different career stages, the following research questions are proposed.

RQ 1: What kinds of work experience are related to current performance of a salesperson?

RQ 2: What are the differences in developmental experiences between the early stage and latter stage of a salesperson's career?

Work-related beliefs, or personal theories or philosophies about how to behave in work situations, are regarded as metacognitive knowledge. For example, salespeople may have sales beliefs that guide their selling methods or skills, and that influence the experiential learning process. It can be said that salespeople with different sales beliefs may learn

differently from work experiences because sales beliefs may function as a type of ability to learn from experience. Thus, the following hypothesis is proposed.

Hypothesis: The relationship between work experience and sales performance differ among salespeople with different sales beliefs.

### **3 METHOD**

#### **3.1 Sample and procedures**

The subjects of this study are salespeople of a large-scale real estate agent in Japan. The company operates mainly in the Tokyo area. Two kinds of survey were conducted of salespeople working in a department that engages in mediation business between buyers and sellers of real estate. The reason for choosing salespeople is that it is relatively easy to obtain performance data that is necessary to interpret whether specific work experience contributes to enhancing their knowledge and skills. Real estate selling is also appropriate for this study because selling style is based on individual selling rather than team selling that makes individual performance unclear.

Items of work experience and sales beliefs were collected by preliminary research using an open-ended mail survey of 72 high-performing salespeople with more than 10 years of experience. They were asked to describe the work experience that seemed to have enhanced their sales skills and knowledge in the first 10 years of career. They were also asked to describe the beliefs or philosophy they follow in conducting selling activities. The descriptions of work experience and sales beliefs were used to develop the quantitative questionnaire.

Next, a quantitative questionnaire survey was conducted to measure work experience and sales beliefs of 218 salespeople who have more than 10 years experience in the real estate industry. Although participants were required to sign their names on the questionnaire to obtain their objective sales performance from headquarters after survey, they were assured that their individual answers would be held in confidence. To maximize privacy and minimize bias, respondents completed surveys in sealed envelopes that were gathered and returned to a research company.

#### **3.2 Measures**

In the quantitative questionnaire survey, 45 items of work experience and 32 items of sales beliefs, which were extracted from the preliminary open-ended survey, were presented to respondents. Respondents were asked what kind of experience they had in the early stage (1-5 years) and latter stage (6-10years) of their careers as salespeople using a seven-point Likert scale (1= not important, 7= very important). When they had no experience, they were asked to check the mark "not experienced". They were also asked what sort of beliefs or philosophy they follow in conducting selling activities using a seven-point Likert scale (1= strongly disagree, 7= strongly agree). Sales performance was measured by sales volume during the previous year. In order to remove the effect of market conditions of the branch they belong to, standardized data of sales performance in each sales area was used in the analyses.

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In order to classify the items of work experience and sales beliefs, the following procedures were adopted. First, factor analyses with Varimax rotation were conducted with work experience (45 items) and sales beliefs (14 items). Items of work experience were analyzed in early stage (1-5 years) and latter stage (6-10) separately. Then, items were deleted when loadings were below .40 on all factors, and if the Cronbach's alpha of a dimension would increase if the item was deleted. This procedure was repeated until Cronbach's alphas of all factors were above .70.

**Table 1 Work Experience at Early Stage**

Work experience during early stage (1-5 years)	Factor loadings
F1 Interaction with customers ( $\alpha=.89$ )	
Trusted by customers and got referrals.	.74
Accomplished difficult tasks	.72
Complied with difficult requests from customer	.70
Got referrals from existing customers	.62
Was entrusted with and succesfully coped with important tasks	.56
Appreciated by customers	.56
Scolded by customers	.50
Had relationships with traders in related industries	.50
Developed relationship with customers by solving their complaints	.50
F2 Expansion of professional duties ( $\alpha=.73$ )	
Was transferred to different branch, scope of job expanded	.61
Was entrusted with leading subordinates, increased sense of responsibility	.59
Gained confidence by passing a qualifying examination for real estate agent	.54
Bar was raised on sales goals	.54
F3 Working with bosses and colleagues ( $\alpha=.85$ )	
Worked with respectable colleagues and bosses	.85
Trained by respectable bosses	.75
F4 Regrettable events ( $\alpha=.75$ )	
Was made fun of by colleagues and bosses and decided to get back at them	.72
Scolded by bosses	.54
Felt bitter when defeated by salespeople of other branches	.49
Felt bitter when losing a customer to a competing firm	.42

Note: Factor analysis with Varimax rotation

Based on this procedure, work experience was grouped into four dimensions (expansion of professional duties, interaction with customers, regrettable events, working with bosses and colleagues) in the early stage, and six dimensions (attainment of difficult tasks, expansion of professional duties, increase of referral, interaction with customers, working with bosses and colleagues, inspiring experience) in the latter stage (Table 1 and Table 2).

**Table 2 Work Experience at Latter Stage**

Work experience at latter stage (6-10 years)	Factor loadings
F1 Inspiring experience ( $\alpha=.78$ )	
Scolded by bosses	.65
Acquired sales skills through training	.62
Was made fun of by colleagues and bosses and decided to get back at them	.61
Gained confidence by passing a qualifying examination for real estate agent	.55
Acquired sales skills by working with veteran salespersons	.55
Felt bitter when defeated by salespeople of other branches	.54
Supervised by stern bosses	.51
F2 Interaction with customers ( $\alpha=.81$ )	
Scolded by customers	.66
Complied with difficult requests from customer	.62
Appreciated by customers	.51
Accomplished difficult tasks	.51
Dealt with serious complaints	.48
Felt bitter when losing a customer to a competing firm	.43
F3 Expansion of professional duties ( $\alpha=.83$ )	
Was entrusted with leading subordinates, increased sense of responsibility	.70
Was transferred to different branch, scope of job expanded	.55
Had relationships with traders in related industries	.51
Bar was raised on sales goals	.41
F4 Attainment of difficult tasks ( $\alpha=.82$ )	
Completed the work by own effort	.68
Was entrusted with and successfully coped with important tasks	.52
Gained confidence by accomplishing harder goals	.47
Gained confidence when my efforts bore fruit	.45
Pay raised and got ambitious to increase salary even more	.42
F5 Increase of referral ( $\alpha=.74$ )	
Got referrals from existing customers	.81
Trusted by customers and got referrals.	.77
F6 Working with bosses and colleagues ( $\alpha=.84$ )	
Worked with respectable colleagues and bosses	.61
Trained by respectable bosses	.58

Note: Factor analysis with Varimax rotation



By the same procedures as above, sales beliefs were also classified into two dimensions: customer orientation and goal-achievement orientation, as shown in Table 3. Customer orientation stresses enhancing customer satisfaction by providing sincere and quick service. Goal-achievement orientation emphasizes the importance goal attainment, self-management, and competition with other salespeople.

**Table 3 Sales Beliefs**

Sales belief items	Factor loadings
F1: Customer orientation ( $\alpha=.88$ )	
Don't make a customer regret their decisions	.70
Fulfill promises to customer	.64
Always provide sincere service	.82
React quickly to customer needs	.78
Establish a trustful relationship with customer	.71
Try to be fond of the customer	.56
Think from a customer's point of view	.63
Make the customer satisfied	.83
F2: Goal achievement orientation ( $\alpha=.82$ )	
Continuation is important for selling	.59
Self-management	.56
Attain goals without fail	.57
Give maximum effort towards problem solving	.46
Don't lose in competition with others	.32
Reject what is impossible	.24

Note: Factor analysis with Varimax rotation

Internal consistencies (Cronbach's alphas) of dimensions of work experience and sales beliefs are shown in Table 1, 2, and 3. All of the measures are above .70, ranging from .73 to .89 and were deemed satisfactory.

In analyzing the relationship between work experience and sales performance, importance of work experience (using seven-point Likert scale) was not used. Instead, the total score of frequency data of work experience (respondent experienced =1; not experienced=0) was calculated for each dimension and used as the work experience variable.

#### 4 RESULTS

Correlation analyses between work experience and sales performance were conducted for the two stages. As shown in Table 4, 'expansion of professional duties' ( $r=.19, p<.01$ ) was

positively related to sales performance during the early stage, while 'attainment of difficult tasks' ( $r=.23$ ,  $p<.001$ ), ' expansion of professional duties ' ( $r=.21$ ,  $p<.001$ ), and 'increase of referral' ( $r=.17$ ,  $p<.001$ ) were positively related to sales performance during the latter stage.

**Table 4 Work Experience and Sales Performance**

Work Experience	Correlation	
Early stage (1-5years)		
Expansion of the professional duties	.19	**
Interaction with customers	.09	
Regrettable events	.07	
Working with respectable bosses and colleagues	.02	
Latter stage (6-10years)		
Attainment of difficult tasks	.23	***
Expansion of the professional duties	.21	***
Increase of referral	.17	*
Interaction with customers	.12	
Working with respectable bosses and colleagues	.07	
Inspiring experience	.03	

Note1 : n=194

Note2 : \* $p<.05$ ; \*\* $p<.01$ ; \*\*\* $p<.001$

Next, respondents were categorized into two groups in terms of sales beliefs (high customer orientation and low customer orientation; high goal-achievement orientation and low goal-achievement orientation), and correlation analyses of work experience with sales performance were conducted in each group.

Table 5 shows that work experience was positively related to sales performance in the high customer orientation group, while there was no significant correlation in the low customer orientation group. This suggests that past experiences of customer oriented salespeople contribute to current sales performance (interaction with customers ( $r=.21$ ,  $p<.05$ ), expansion of professional duties ( $r=.30$ ,  $p<.001$ ) in the early stage, expansion of professional duties ( $r=.30$ ,  $p<.001$ ), attainment of difficult tasks ( $r=.33$ ,  $p<.001$ ), and increase of referral ( $r=.22$ ,  $p<.05$ ) in the latter stage). In contrast, less customer oriented salespeople's past experiences did not contribute to current sales performance.

As shown in Table 6, there is no clear difference in the relationship between work experience and sales performance between salespeople with high goal achievement orientation and those with low goal achievement orientation. This indicates that salespeople learn from past experiences regardless of their sales beliefs on goal-achievement, except for the fact that highly goal achievement oriented salespeople learned from working with

bosses and colleagues in the early stage ( $r=.22$ ,  $p<.05$ ), and learned from attainment of difficult tasks ( $r=.34$ ,  $p<.001$ ) rather than expansion of professional duties in the latter stage. Thus, the results partially support the hypothesis of this study.

In order to investigate the nature of two types of sales beliefs, correlation analyses between sales beliefs and sales performance were conducted (Table 7). The results suggest that customer orientation is not significantly related to sales performance ( $r=-.01$ , n.s.), while goal achievement orientation is positively related to sales performance ( $r=.16$ ,  $p<.05$ ).

**Table 5 Effects of Customer-Oriented Sales Beliefs on the Relationship between Work Experience and Sales Performance (Correlation)**

Work Experience	Customer orientation (low) n=99	Customer orientation (high) n=106	
Early stage (1-5years)			
Interaction with customers	-.02	.21	*
Expansion of the professional duties	.08	.30	**
			*
Working with excellent bosses and colleagues	-.10	.20	
Regrettable events	-.04	.18	
Latter stage (6-10years)			
Inspiring experience	.01	.06	
Interaction with customers	.17	.07	
Expansion of the professional duties	.08	.30	**
			*
Attainment of difficult tasks	.18	.33	**
			*
Increase of referral	.12	.22	*
Working with respectable bosses and colleagues	.05	.11	

Note: \* $p<.05$ ; \*\* $p<.01$ ; \*\*\* $p<.001$

## 5 DISCUSSION

### 5.1 Theoretical implications

The purposes of this study were to examine developmental experience at different career stages and to clarify the role of work-related beliefs in promoting experiential learning. By applying the theoretical framework of expertise research and cognitive psychology, this study found that (1) salespeople learn mainly from job assignments rather than other people (bosses, colleagues, and customers), (2) experiential learning is activated in the latter stage

(from 6 to 10 years of career), (3) customer oriented sales beliefs promote experiential learning in the long run.

**Table 6 Effects of Goal-Attainment Sales Beliefs on the Relationship between Work Experience and Sales Performance (Correlation)**

Work Experience	Goal attainment (low) n=97	Goal attainment (high) n=105		
Early stage (1-5years)				
Interaction with customers	.19	.19		
Expansion of the professional duties	.28	* .25	*	*
Working with respectable bosses and colleagues	-.04	.22		*
Regrettable events	.19	.18		
Latter stage (6-10years)				
Inspiring experience	.17	.01		
Interaction with customers	.18	.08		
Expansion of the professional duties	.28	* .20	*	
Attainment of difficult tasks	.17	.34		**
				*
Increase of referral	.26	* .14	*	
Working with excellent bosses and colleagues	.04	.05		

Note: \*p<.05; \*\*p<.01; \*\*\*p<.001

**Table 7 Sales Beliefs and Sales Performance**

Sales Beliefs	Correlation
Customer orientation	-.01
Goal achievement orientation	.16 *

Note1: n=194

Note2: \*p<.05

The theoretical contribution of this study to the experiential learning literature can be summarized as follows. First, results show that ‘expansion of professional duties’ is critical for experiential learning both during the early and latter periods of a career, while ‘interaction with customers’ and ‘working with bosses and colleagues’ had no impact on performance. This finding suggests that salespeople learn mainly from job assignments rather than other people, which is correspondent to previous research. Among three main

categories of work experience including job assignments (or job transitions, task-related characteristics), 'other people', and 'hardships (or obstacles)' (McCauley et al., 1994; McCall, 1998; McCall et al., 1988), job assignments were found to be important to salespeople's learning. One of the reasons is that real estate selling is conducted by individual salespeople and not by teams.

Second, there were differences in developmental experience between early and latter stages. During the early stage, only expansion of professional duties was positively related to performance, while attainment of difficult tasks, expansion of professional duties, and increase of referral were positively related to sales performance in the latter stage. The findings can be interpreted as that experiential learning is activated in the latter stage of 10-year experience (from 6 to 10 years of career). Although previous research suggests that managers learn through challenging job experiences (Davies and Easterby-Smith, 1984; McCall, 1998; McCauley et al., 1994), there is no argument on the career stage during which manager should be challenged. This study provides a new insight to the 10-year rule of necessary preparation that several stages such as suggested by Dreyfus and Dreyfus's (1987) model should be considered in examining deliberate practices (Ericsson, 1996).

Third, it was found that customer oriented salespeople learn more from experience as compared with less customer oriented salespeople. The finding indicates that customer oriented sales beliefs work as a type of ability to learn from experience by directing salespeople's behaviors. Although prior research focuses on employee's attitude (Spreitzer et al., 1997) or self-esteem (Brutus et al., 2000), this study found the role of work-related beliefs in facilitating experiential learning.

The individual level of customer orientation of salespeople or service workers has been investigated in the field of service marketing. Brown et al. (2002) defined customer orientation as an employee's tendency or predisposition to meet customer needs in an on-the-job context. Service marketing researchers have mainly focused on the effect of individual customer orientation on job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and organizational citizenship behaviors (Boles et al. 2001; Brown et al. 2002; Donovan et al. 2004; Franke and Park 2006; Harris, Mowen, and Brown 2005), while no research has examined its role in facilitating experiential learning. Therefore, this study may be the first empirical research to find the role of customer orientation in promoting experiential learning.

The mechanism of customer oriented beliefs in experiential learning can be explained as follows. Since customer oriented salespeople, who try to enhance satisfaction of each customer, need advanced knowledge and skills to solve customer problems, they are always required to acquire new knowledge and skills. In addition, customer oriented sales beliefs may encourage salespeople to 'use feedback', 'seek opportunities', 'be open to criticism', 'seek feedback', and 'be flexible', which are main dimensions of ability to learn from experience, proposed by Spreitzer et al. (1997). It should be also noted that customer orientation promotes learning activities in the long term rather than sales performance in the short term, since customer orientation is not significantly related to current sales performance.

## 5.2 Practical implication

The results of this study have some practical implications. First, managers of sales departments should recognize the importance of job assignment in promoting experiential learning. Especially, salespeople should be encouraged to take responsibility for leading subordinates, work at different branches, have more difficult goals set, and have relationship with traders in related industries, which helps them to acquire new knowledge and skills.

Second, it is necessary for managers to consider the career stage when assigning job tasks to salespeople. The period from 6 to 10 years of a salesperson's career is the important stage for learning. At this stage salespeople should deal with difficult tasks such as completing the work by their own effort, or accomplishing harder goals. A period of the first five years should be regarded as the time during which salespeople acquire basic knowledge through experiencing a variety of tasks.

Finally, managers have to pay attention to the role of customer orientation in promoting experiential learning. Training and evaluation systems that aim to enhance customer orientation of salespeople may be effective in activating experiential learning in an organization. Although customer orientation has no short-term effect in enhancing performance, it facilitates learning capability of salespeople in the long run.

## 5.3 Limitations and future research

The limitations of this study should be acknowledged. First, developmental experience may depend on the task traits professionals engage in. For example, experiences working with other people may be important to people who work as teams. Since the data of this study is limited to real estate salespeople, it is necessary to clarify the effect of task traits on experiential learning process by conducting surveys in various industries.

Second, since the career stage was divided into only two periods in this study, a more detailed and sophisticated stage model should be applied to investigate the experiential learning process in the first 10 years. Exploring experiential learning after 10 years of career is also an important research topic.

Finally, this study developed new scales of work experiences and sales beliefs. In future research, established scales of work experiences and customer orientation should be used to verify the findings of this study.

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