The Technology-to-Performance Chain: Conceptualizing How Lead Management Systems Drive Inside Sales Performance

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Abstract

Inside sales are remote sales that are performed using different communication technologies. Since there is no traditional face-to-face interaction between the salesperson and the lead (i.e., the potential customer), it is vital that the leads, which are costly to obtain, are managed properly. Leads management is usually operationalized using information technology tools called lead management systems. There is a need to understand the impact of lead management systems on inside sales performance as well as to identify key drivers and enablers of inside sales performance. This research develops a conceptual model to investigate the impact of lead management systems on inside sales performance through mediating mechanisms of task characteristics (call productivity and lead follow-up), selling behaviour (adaptive selling) and salesperson characteristics (salesperson's competency). The findings of this research contributes to the inside sales literature, and educates practitioners in the inside sales industry on sales technology approaches and factors that enhance sales performance.

Keywords: Inside Sales, Lead Management Systems, Sales Performance, Conceptual Model.

1. INTRODUCTION

There is currently a shortage of research studies on inside sales in general, and in particularly on sales-technology approaches to the inside sales process that can help shape future development decisions and enhance sales performance. Despite the fact that the field of inside sales is known to be an early adopter of Customer Relationship Management (CRM) technology, little has been done to study it (Dickie & Trailer, 2006). The term "inside sales" is defined as remote sales or professional sales done remotely (Krogue, 2013). They enable individuals or groups to advocate for their products and services to prospective customers via the telephone or the Internet rather than via traditional in-person interaction (Seley & Holloway, 2008). In contrast, outside sales (aka field sales) refer to the selling of products and services away from a company's place of business, usually at a customer's place of business or their home. Most inside sales are conducted in business-to-business (B2B)

environments (Davis, 2013; Krogue, 2013). The fact that this is a rapidly evolving trend in the business world means that it requires in-depth exploration. A trends study conducted in 2009 found that inside sales were consistently growing as an industry (Oldroyd, 2009), and in 2013 the growth rate of inside sales was found to be 5% greater than that of outside sales (Warner, 2013).

A crucial success factor in any inside sales setting is the efficacy with which leads and contacts are managed. A lead is a documented interest in an organization's product or service, irrespective of whether that interest is from a new prospect or from an existing customer (Monat, 2011). A lead usually contains the basic information a salesperson needs to make that first contact with a potential customer (Griggs, 1997). Lead management incorporates a set of organized processes and procedures to make certain that all generated and qualified leads are pursued by sales.

The diligent follow-up of sales leads is a crucial part of the customer-acquisition process in B2B firms (Sabnis, Chatterjee, Grewal, & Lilien, 2013). B2B organizations spend an estimated $30 to $200 on each marketing lead generated, while B2C (business-to-consumer) organizations spend an estimated $2 to $25 per lead generated through advertising, web campaigns and trade-show efforts (Olenski, 2012). Notwithstanding the substantial investments that are made, statistics show that the majority of these leads are ignored and never contacted (Griggs, 1997; MarketingSherpa, 2011) because of a poor work ethic among sales personnel (Sabnis et al., 2013) and because of inefficient lead management systems (Griggs, 1997; Vanillasoft, 2014). Well-organized lead management is an important part of marketing effectiveness. Failure to efficiently manage leads diminishes sales results and increases costs, which ultimately hinders the ability of sales and marketing programs to achieve financial and organizational objectives. Nevertheless, few academic studies have attempted to research the best lead management practices in order to address this problem and thereby improve the customer-acquisition process (Elkington & Oldroyd, 2007; Sabnis et al., 2013).

Technology plays a vital role in inside sales but many inside sales programs fail to achieve their goals because of the inefficiencies introduced by technologies that support the inside sales function (Marketo, 2008). It is evident that not much effort has been made to study how technology supports inside sales. Most studies have focused on the outside sales domain. There is a need to understand how technology is used in inside sales and how it supports their process.

Most importantly, no study has yet addressed the role of lead management systems and specifically how well organized practices within lead management can help to drive sales performance in the inside sales industry. We see a strong potential in addressing the challenges faced by sales organizations in terms of lead management by means of carefully designed lead management systems. The processes and systems involved in resourcefully managing these leads are prerequisites for sales success, hence we need lead management systems built on best practices.

In this research, we look at the practices that enable information systems to leverage and strengthen key aspects of sales performance in the inside sales industry. We focus on the consequences of lead management systems usage by *developing a conceptual model to explore their impact of key drivers and inhibitors on sales performance.* In order to achieve this objective, we seek to answer the following questions:

1. What are the drivers and enablers of inside sales performance?

2. How does the use of lead management systems influence inside sales performance?

The rest of this paper is organized as follows. First, we review the theoretical background and related work on Information Technology (IT) impacts on sales performance. We then detail our hypotheses, and develop a conceptual model to explore lead management systems' impacts on inside sales performance. Finally, we discuss the theoretical and practical implications of our research.

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Numerous studies have acknowledged the significance of IT in optimizing sales performance (e.g., Ahearne, Hughes, & Schillewaert, 2007; Ahearne, Jones, Rapp, & Mathieu, 2008; Hunter & Perreault Jr, 2006; Rapp, Beitelspacher, Schillewaert, & Baker,

2012). For instance, the impact of IT on sales performance can be seen through the Task-Technology-Fit (TTF) theory by Goodhue and Thompson (1995). This theory claims that individuals' use of IT affects their performance and that the performance benefits will be greater if the IT fits the task (Goodhue & Thompson, 1995).

While some studies extending the TTF theory in sales have been conducted, they have mostly focused on outside sales. Ahearne, Hughes, & Schillewaert (2007) suggest that IT influences sales performane through mediating processes of knowledge, call productivity, presentation and targeting skills. Rapp, Agnihotri, and Forbes (2008) argue that IT use for analytical purposes (i.e., CRM) positively influences adaptive selling, and that IT use for operational purposes (i.e., SFA) reduces the number of hours worked by salespeople (Effort). Ultimately, both adaptive selling and effort influence sales performance. Ahearne et al. (2008) advocate that IT does not influence performance directly but rather through a variety of mediating factors, namely selling behaviour (customer service), and salesperson characteristics (adaptability), which are demonstrated during salesperson-customer exchanges. Relatedly, Park, Kim, Dubinsky, & Lee (2011) suggest that SFA usage influences performance through adaptive selling, marketing information processing and relationship quality.

None of the models introduced by these studies can fully be applied to an inside sales domain because they all lack one or more variables important for completing the inside sales task of lead management. The literature calls for an extension on the TTF theory to develop a technology-to-performance chain model for inside sales. The TTF theory emphasizes the use of technology to achieve distinctive strategic goals (Goodhue & Thompson, 1995). Thus, we extend this theory to help understand how the use of technology (i.e., Lead management systems) to effectively support the lead management task influences performance in the inside sales industry.

To begin with, it is important that we identify and categorize, from the literature, the drivers of inside sales performance, and subsequently pinpoint those that are crucial for achieving the lead management objectives. Weitz (1981) suggests that a salesperson's performance is impacted by their selling behaviour (i.e., adaptive selling), which is moderated by a salesperson's characteristics (i.e., knowledge, motivation, skills, etc.), selling relationship characteristics and task characteristics. Churchill Jr, Ford, Hartley, and Walker Jr (1985) propose six elements that determine the performance of a salesperson and ultimately sales performance: role variables, skill, motivation, personal factors, aptitude, and organizational or environmental factors. Weitz, Sujan, and Sujan (1986) argue that sales management variables (i.e., selling environment), salesperson characteristics and salesperson behaviour determine a salesperson's performance. Kohli (1989) propose that a salesperson's performance is impacted by variables that can be grouped in three categories: salesperson's characteristics and role perception, task characteristics, and supervisory behaviours. Finally, Verbeke, Dietz, and Verwaal (2011) identified five elements to predict sales performance, namely selling-related knowledge, adaptive selling, role ambiguity, aptitude, and work engagement.

To better assess the relationship between IT and sales performance, we base our arguments on the technology-to-performance chain (TCP) model (Goodhue & Thompson, 1995 p.217) of the TTF theory. Furthermore, and based on our discussion highlighting the factors that determine sales performance, we classify the impact of lead management systems' usage on sales performance via the following mediators: (1) task characteristics, (2) selling behaviour, and (3) salesperson's characteristics. These mediators reflect the benefits of lead management systems, plus they have been acknowledged in the literature as key determinants of sales performance (e.g., Weitz, 1981). These are briefly discussed below.

1.1 Task Characteristics

Tasks are activities performed by individuals to achieve outputs (Goodhue & Thompson, 1995). Studies have evaluated salespeople's tasks by measuring the effort a salesperson devotes to achieving sales objectives. Such effort is measured by the number of sales calls over the total time invested by the salesperson (Rapp et al., 2008; Rapp, Ahearne, Mathieu, & Schillewaert, 2006; Sujan, Weitz, & Kumar, 1994), the persistency devoted to work, and continuing to try in the face of failures (Sujan et al., 1994). An important representation of salespeople's efforts to realize their objectives is the activity through which they complete their tasks (Brown & Peterson, 1994; Rapp et al., 2008). In our research, the basic activities

associated with achieving lead management tasks include identifying profitable leads, making calls to leads and following-up on leads with calls, voicemails and emails. Hence, we characterize a salesperson's effort on lead management into *call productivity* and *lead follow-up*.

Selling Behaviour

Plank and Reid (1994) defined selling behaviour as the strategy people use during the execution of selling-related activities to aid the performance of their jobs. Two selling behaviours (adaptive and customer-oriented) have been investigated in the sales force research stream (Chakrabarty, Widing, & Brown, 2014; Franke & Park, 2006). The correlation between customer-oriented selling and sales performance is highly dependent upon long term buyer-seller relationship (Chakrabarty et al., 2014; Saxe & Weitz, 1982). However, given that our research is related to a short term customer acquisition activity (i.e., lead management), it may be difficult to obtain applicable data that can justify the relationship between the two variables, and hence, our research will not consider customer-oriented selling. Adaptive selling on the other hand is important in aiding the performance of the lead management process.

Salesperson Characteristics

A salesperson's characteristic has been conceptualized as a combination of a salesperson's selling-related knowledge, skills, attitude, role perception and motivation (Ahearne et al., 2008; Churchill Jr et al., 1985; Verbeke et al., 2011). We believe that a combination of these factors reflects a **"**salesperson's competency**",** competency being a cluster of related knowledge, attitudes, and skills of a person, resulting in effective and/or superior performance (Lambert, 2009; Richard, 1982).

3. CONCEPTUAL MODEL DEVELOPMENT

Based on the above, we propose a model (Figure 1) exploring the impact of lead management systems' usage on inside sales performance via the mediators *selling behaviour* (adaptive selling), *task characteristics* (call productivity and lead follow-up) and *salesperson characteristics* (Salesperson's competency). The following discussion explains the development of the concepts used in this study.

Sales Performance

The discipline of sales has a long history of research on performance. Sales performance is the realized outcome from executing tasks, which may differ greatly across different types of selling jobs and situations (Walker, Churchill, & Ford, 1979). In earlier times, dollar or sales volume was the insightful way to conceptualize sales performance (Barker, 1999). However, with the growing significance of customer satisfaction, loyalty, customer knowledge and other crucial customer interaction aspects (Zallocco, Pullins, & Mallin, 2009), diverse concepts for sales performance were established. Behrman and Perreault Jr (1982) suggest that producing high market share, selling products with highest profit margins, quickly generating sales of new products, generating high levels of dollar sales, producing sales with long-term profitability, selling to major accounts, and exceeding annual sales objectives are significant reflections of sales performance. Anderson and Oliver (1987) see sales performance as the evaluation of salespeople based on outcomes (e.g., revenue) and behavioural (e.g., salesperson competence) performance. Zallocco et al. (2009) synthesised previous studies and grouped sales performance into performance *effectiveness* and performance *efficiency*. They describe efficiency as the ratio of selling output (close ratios) to selling input (sales calls), and effectiveness as a measurable salesperson's contribution and skill-based behaviours to valued organizational outcomes.

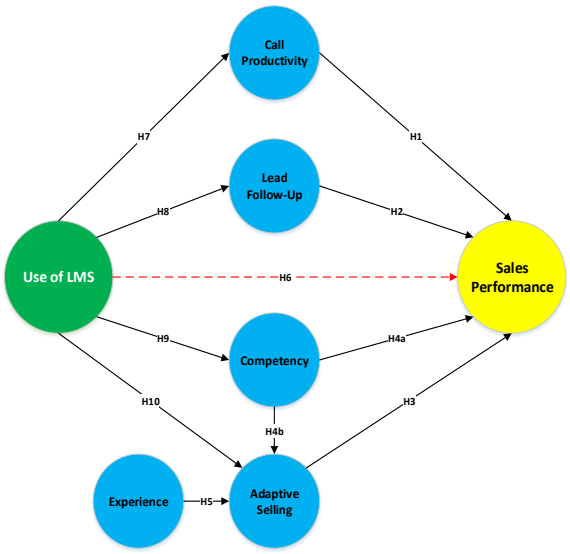

Figure 1: Conceptual Model

We define sales performance as the degree of efficiency and effectiveness to which a salesperson achieves the objectives of lead management for an inside sales organization. Most inside sales organizations set numeric goals for their salespeople to accomplish within a specified time period. The nature of the goal to be achieved varies from an organization to the next. Typically, it can be revenue or sales volume based. For some inside sales organizations, it might be measured by the number of call dials advocated by a salesperson.

Call Productivity

For inside sales organizations, a call is an instance of speaking to a lead or attempting to contact a lead through the phone or Internet technologies with the intention of selling a product or service. Productivity (output over input) is the key measure of a salesperson's calling activity (Ahearne et al., 2007; Sujan et al., 1994) and is not limited to making lots of calls but making quality calls that could yield sales. As reported in Vanillasoft (2014) , most salespeople often dial to hit their daily call quota. We define sales call productivity as the number of sales calls made by a salesperson over the number of hours as well as the ratio of successful call connects. In general, the achievement of lead management activities influences sales performance. Improved sales call productivity has been known to impact sales performance (Ahearne et al., 2007; Rapp et al., 2012; Zallocco et al., 2009). We posit that:

***Hypothesis 1**: Sales call productivity positively affects sales performance*

Lead Follow-up

Sabnis et al. (2013) described lead follow-up as customer acquisition efforts on generated leads. It is the ability of a salesperson to closely pursue leads and to maintain contact with these leads until the close of sales or a lead is abandoned. Every lead is a potential sale, so salespeople need to work on every lead with persistency and speed (Elkington & Oldroyd, 2007). The earlier a lead is contacted after an enquiry, the more chances there are of converting it into a sale. Response time impacts lead qualification and ultimately sales. Prospects usually develop a high perception of an organization's product or service when salespeople quickly contact them after an inquiry. Lead follow-up increases conversion ratio, and improved lead conversion ratio is a core indicator of enhanced sales performance. It also helps organizations to realize the full benefits of their marketing programs and reduce the number of leads that go to waste. We posit that:

***Hypothesis 2**: Lead follow-up positively affects sales performance*

Adaptive Selling

This strategic selling approach involves the *"altering of selling behaviours during a customer interaction or across customer interactions based on perceived information about the nature of the selling situation"* (Weitz et al., 1986). Adaptive selling is measured by the ease and flexibility with which salespeople change their selling styles while making sales (e.g., does a salesperson vary his/her selling style from customer to customer?).

Salespeople can use information gathered from customers to increase sales value and profits (Hughes, Le Bon, & Rapp, 2013) by modifying sales presentations strategies to fit individual customers' needs and preferences (Franke & Park, 2006) for the purpose of improving the likelihood of making a sale (Giacobbe, Jackson Jr, Crosby, & Bridges, 2006). The basis for adaptive selling behaviour comes from the fact that there is no single best way to sell, and therefore a good salesperson should be able to select, alter and implement a sales strategy based on the characteristics of the prospective customer and selling situation (Román & Iacobucci, 2010).

The sales and marketing literature provides general support for the relationship between adaptive selling and sales performance (Boorom, Goolsby, & Ramsey, 1998; Chakrabarty et al., 2014; Franke & Park, 2006; Goad & Jaramillo, 2014; Hughes et al., 2013; Hunter & Perreault Jr, 2006; Rapp et al., 2008; Verbeke et al., 2011; Weitz et al., 1986). Adaptive selling behaviour explained about one-third of the variation in sales performance in (Giacobbe et al., 2006). Chakrabarty et al. (2014) found that highly adaptive salespeople developed trust in their customers which in turn improved sales performance. Boorom et al. (1998), Franke and Park (2006), and Ahearne et al. (2008) found a direct positive relationship between adaptive selling and performance. Adaptive selling behaviour increases a salesperson's outcome performance, customers' feeling of satisfaction with the product and the salesperson (Román & Iacobucci, 2010). Finally, adaptive selling behaviour was ranked the second most

significant driver of sales performance in Verbeke et al. (2011). Hence, we adapt to the growing body of research that has validated and is attempting to validate the positive relationship between adaptive selling behaviour and sales performance. We posit that:

***Hypothesis 3**: Adaptive selling behaviour positively affects sales performance*

Salesperson Competency

We define salesperson competency as *"the ability of a salesperson to effectively and efficiently carry out a sales task"*. Selling knowledge, presentation and targeting skills (Ahearne et al., 2007) are important qualities in selling.

- **Selling Knowledge** symbolizes the quantity and richness of knowledge that salespeople use to advocate sales of an organization's product or service to help solve buyers' problems (Verbeke et al., 2011). It comprises the technical and market knowledge of a salesperson (i.e., product uses, specifications, current market situations, etc.) (Behrman & Perreault Jr, 1982). Knowledgeable salespeople are conversant with their company's product or service and have an understanding of the needs and expectations of customers and prospects (Rapp et al., 2006).

- **Sales Presentation Skills** represent *"a line of conversation that attempts to convince a lead, to initiate and or close a sale of the product or service"*. Salespeople are the link between organizations and their customers and prospects, and are responsible for giving clear presentations and answering customers' questions (Behrman & Perreault Jr, 1984). Sales presentations are important to persuade leads that an organization's products or services will fulfil their needs.

- **Targeting Skills** refer to the ability of a salesperson to identify and select leads with high interest, potential and ability to buy, thus increasing the chances to convert theses leads into sales (Ahearne et al., 2007). A salesperson's ability to target leads that represent the greatest potential for sales is crucial for inside sales organizations. These organizations want their salespeople to make more calls but even better they want these calls to create business opportunities and yield sales.

To relate these competency traits to performance, Weitz et al. (1986) suggested that salespeople's knowledge and skills impacted their performance and overall effectiveness. Ahearne et al. (2008) found a positive relationship between a salesperson's knowledge and sales performance, while Verbeke et al. (2011) ranked a salesperson's selling-related knowledge the first driver of sales performance. Behrman and Perreault (1982) revealed that giving high quality sales presentations that deliver the right message to prospects is a crucial dimension of a salesperson's performance. Finally, Ahearne et al. (2007) found a positive relationship between a salesperson's targeting skills and sales performance. Hence, we posit that:

***Hypothesis 4a**: A salesperson's competency positively affects sales performance*

Furthermore, studies found a positive relationship between salespeople's competency and their ability to effectively practice adaptive selling. Salespeople's selling knowledge affects the strategy they select to communicate and make sales presentations to buyers (Ahearne et al., 2007). Salespeople with enhanced selling knowledge and presentation and targeting skills know who to approach, when and how (Verbeke et al., 2011; Weitz et al., 1986). A salesperson practicing adaptive selling leverages knowledge about customers to tailor unique solutions to situations (Weitz et al., 1986). Hence we hypothesize that:

***Hypothesis 4b**: A salesperson's competency positively affects their adaptive selling behaviour.*

The Moderating Effect of Experience

Rapp et al. (2006) define a salesperson's "experience" as his/her general sales experience, the amount of time spent working with the current company and the time spent in the current territory. Giacobbe et al. (2006) suggested that salespeople's experience impacts their adaptive selling behaviour via their intent to practice adaptive selling because a salesperson is better able to determine what sales strategy to use when he/she has already experienced such encounters and is aware of the possible outcomes of applying different sales

approaches. Therefore choosing an approach is most likely to lead to a sale. Repeated experiences enable salespeople to align what they recognize to effectively practice adaptive selling. Park and Holloway (2003) and Levy and Sharma (1994) posited that a salesperson's experience may be a strong predictor of his/her selling behaviour. We posit that:

***Hypothesis 5**: A salesperson's experience moderates the effects of adaptive selling on sales performance.*

Usage of Lead Management Systems

Lead management systems use various IT tools to streamline and automate labour-intensive lead management processes. They support inside sales with the appropriate tools to interact with a higher volume of leads while sustaining quality conversations using background data about prospects delivered through CRM's marketing automation tools (Davis, 2013). They encompass key attributes of sales force automation (SFA) and CRM technology. As an SFA tool, a lead management system automates sales activities of lead management by providing tools (Erffmeyer & Johnson, 2001; Moutot & Bascoul, 2008; Rivers & Dart, 1999) to support information flow and the execution of routine lead management tasks (Rapp et al., 2008). As a CRM tool, it provides an interpretation of an organization's customer base (e.g., interaction and purchase histories) to support the objectives of managing customer relationships by making selling tasks more efficient (Ahearne et al., 2008; Rapp et al., 2008).

"IT can't increase or decrease the output of people's performance, only use of it can" (Orlikowski, 2000), and the use must be effective (Burton-Jones & Grange, 2013). We define *"usage of lead management systems" as the degree to which salespeople integrate lead management systems to carry out lead management tasks*. Usage refers to a de facto use of the lead management systems' potential.

Previous studies have connected IT and sales performance indirectly using mediators such as selling behaviour (Ahearne et al., 2008; Hunter & Perreault Jr, 2006; Rapp et al., 2008), task activities and salesperson competency (Ahearne et al., 2007; Ahearne et al., 2008; Goodhue & Thompson, 1995; Hunter & Perreault Jr, 2006; Rapp et al., 2008). We therefore posit that the effective usage of lead management systems to carry out lead management activities is indirectly associated with higher performance via the mediators call productivity, lead follow-up, adaptive selling and salesperson competency.

***Hypothesis 6**: The use of lead management systems does not directly affect sales performance*

The use of IT improves communications and enhances salespeople's productivity, allowing salespeople to maintain direct contact with customers and prospects (Ahearne et al., 2008; Buehrer, Senecal, & Bolman Pullins, 2005; Erffmeyer & Johnson, 2001; Ferrell, Gonzalez-Padron, & Ferrell, 2010; Honeycutt Jr, 2005; Rapp et al., 2006). This reduces the time salespeople spend on non-selling activities, saving time for them to make more sales calls (Ahearne et al., 2007; Rapp et al., 2008). Ahearne, Jelinek, and Rapp (2005) suggested that effectual use of IT enables salespeople to increase their number of sales calls. It improves the quality of sales calls through efficient filtering of qualified leads. Inside sales organizations deploy lead management systems to increase the call productivity of their salespeople by making available telecommunication tools, sufficient customer data and a standardized workflow to support effective communications with leads, thereby keeping salespeople focused on lead management activities (Ahearne et al., 2007; Goldenberg, 1996). We posit that:

***Hypothesis 7**: The use of lead management systems positively affects call productivity*

A major reason inside sales organizations deploy lead management systems is to ensure all captured leads are given attention and contacted promptly, systematically and constantly. Additionally, salespeople have access to up-to-date information about their leads, lead status report, leads that resulted in sales, leads that have not been worked and why they have not been worked. This ensures the accountability of salespeople in managing leads. We posit that:

***Hypothesis 8**: The use of lead management systems positively affects lead follow-up*

The literature has recognized IT's role in supporting adaptive performance enhancing behaviours (Ahearne et al., 2008; Hunter & Perreault Jr, 2007; Rapp et al., 2008). To practice adaptive selling, a salesperson needs

detailed information about the lead (i.e., personality, mood, etc.) (Porter, Wiener, & Frankwick, 2003). The utilization of customer information is important for salespeople in demonstrating adaptive selling behaviours (Rapp et al., 2008; Weitz et al., 1986) and lead management systems amalgamate the customer information needed to enable these adaptive selling behaviours. Salespeople can use crucial customer information to better organize and support an effective sales presentation (Ahearne et al., 2008) tailored to a particular customer's need and wants (Rapp et al., 2008). Thus, we suggest that lead management systems provide salespeople with the customer information they need to carry out selling adaptability. We posit that:

Hypothesis 9: *The use of lead management systems positively affects adaptive selling behaviour*

To link IT usage and salesperson competency, it was confirmed that a salesperson's selling knowledge can be enhanced by providing information about sales and market situations for salespeople to use (Ahearne et al., 2007; Rapp et al., 2006). IT increases the richness and mobility of information (Jarvenpaa & Ives, 1994). A salesperson can search online databases and the Internet for intelligence, thus improving his/her knowledge of customer needs (Ahearne et al., 2005). Salespeople are able to sift through customer data and better focus on critical information, putting them in a better position to sell (Ahearne et al., 2005). A lead management system supports the sourcing of relevant information and serves as a repository for salespeople to keep abreast of knowledge about business relationships. Unarguably, selling over the phone or online without face-to-face interaction can be difficult, thus inside salespeople need sophisticated tools to support their calls. IT allows rich sales content to be delivered during interactions with customers and prospects. Lead management systems support salespeople with information about market, product and the leads themselves. Salespeople who use such information during presentations can provide a logical business and financial justification for the sale, hence improving product value and ultimately increasing the chances of sale (Ahearne et al., 2007).

As for targeting, Ahearne et al. (2007) found a positive relationships between salespeople's IT usage and their targeting skills. IT supports salespeople with the information needed to target the best leads at the best time. The enhanced visibility gained through the repository of information needed for contact and account management should motivate salespeople to properly select sales calls and only work on those they can justify, which should improve sales ratios. We posit that:

Hypothesis 10*: The use of lead management systems positively affects a salesperson's competency (selling knowledge, presentation and targeting skills)*

5. DISCUSSION AND CONTRIBUTIONS

In recent years, practitioners have tried to learn more about how technology usage influences performance in the inside sales industry. To understand the technology-to-performance link, practitioners must first identify what the important drivers and enablers of inside sales performance are. In this study we conducted a thorough literature review that allowed us to identify three key factors that affect inside sales performance, namely: *task characteristics* (call productivity and lead follow-up); *salesperson's behaviour* (adaptive selling); and *salesperson's characteristics* (competency). Additionally, we recognized the impact of lead management systems usage on these inside sales performance enablers. Based on this review, we developed a conceptual model with hypothesized relationships for these concepts.

We believe our research has several theoretical and managerial contributions. To start with, we addressed the need for theoretical research on inside sales. Our research provides a theoretical standpoint and understanding of the inside sales practice, and the key role that IT plays in inside sales success. Secondly, we presented a conceptual model grounded in the technology-to-performance chain theory that may help researchers investigate the impact of IT usage on inside sales performance. We adapted key theories developed in sales research and applied them to inside sales. Most of the concepts used in this study were previously recognized and empirically validated in the related literature; however, these concepts together have not been used in a study exploring sales performance. Finally, our research identifies important drivers and enablers of inside sales performance.

We propose that the use of lead management systems to complete the lead management task

is indirectly associated with higher performance via the following mediators: *task characteristics* (call productivity and lead follow-up), *selling behavior* (adaptive selling) and *salesperson characteristics* (competency).

The general implication for inside sales practice here is that we help managers understand that the benefits of lead management systems can be seen through better call productivity, improved lead follow-up and superior adaptive selling and competency qualities that occur during the sales process. Hence, it is important for mangers to arm their salespeople with the effective lead management systems and most importantly, they should make sure their salespeople maximize the full potential of these systems. Using lead management systems may help salespeople remain constantly updated with information on the marketplace where they practice and the products/services they sell. The information-based gains from using lead management systems allow salespeople to better understand the needs and purchasing abilities of leads and the best way to sell to those leads.

Further research should improve the understanding of the impact of lead management systems usage on inside sales performance by validating the proposed model with empirical data. The next step in this research is to develop quantitative measures for our concepts, as well as empirically validate the relationships between the concepts in our model. Additional research needs to be conducted to identify the most effective and efficient lead management system architecture by evaluating both past and present development decisions to educate the market on sales technology approaches to the inside sales process that can help shape future development decisions and enhance sales performance.

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