

# Empirical Analysis of Factors which Generate Voluntary Participation in Selling Centers

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## Abstract

Purpose of the research: In response to the increasing number of selling centers, this paper examines factors that influence the voluntary participation in selling centers. The goal of this study is to enable organizations to meet changing market conditions, which require interdisciplinary collaboration during sales projects. This paper also discusses potential problems which may occur during the implementation of these factors in practice. Research design and methodology: The research method consists of a qualitative cross-sectional study with  $N=12$  interviewees. All interviewees are current or former selling center participants. During the interview sessions, semi-structured face-to-face interviews were used, which were evaluated using a qualitative content analysis. In addition, a frequency analysis was applied to evaluate the number of mentions per factor. Research results: In total, five factors were raised in order to improve the framework conditions of voluntary participation. These factors are performance incentives, transparency, availability of resources, goal orientation, as well as collegiality and affiliation. Major conclusions: The identified factors are also under discussion in the existing literature. Knowing about factors that generate voluntary participation in selling centers pays off particularly in improving the probability of completion of sales projects in which buying centers and selling centers are working together.

**Keywords:** Selling Center Participation, Sales Projects, Context Factors, Technical Experts

**JEL Classification Code:** M30, M31

## 1. Introduction

this. These types of hypothetical questions enable narrative suggestions and are particularly useful for encouraging broader thinking (Collis & Hussey, 2009). During the interview session, the interviewer provided in-depth questions, comprehension questions and structuring questions only. Achieving a theoretical saturation after the twelfth interview marked the point this survey was considered complete. Theoretical saturation refers to the situation in which additional interviews would not provide further knowledge (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2010). This means that further interviews no longer led to additional factors.

The recorded interviews were transcribed in Microsoft Word. To detect any ambiguities emerging during the transcription process, a communicative validation between participants and the interviewer took place in order to avoid subjective interpretations. Communicative validation refers to a discussion of interpretations which might be ambiguous between the interviewer and interviewees in order to ensure their correctness (Chen & Cruickshank, 2009; Flick, 2020; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). The transcripts were evaluated by applying a qualitative content analysis. The qualitative content analysis is carried out following a rule-based, step-by-step procedure. This procedure consists of paraphrasing, generalizing and a two-stage reduction process resulting in category formations (Flick, 2006):

- During the paraphrasing, the text material is transformed into concise sentences that are limited to the content;
- During the generalization, these sentences are paraphrased to a uniform level of abstraction;

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- The first step of the reduction selects sentences with central content and deletes paraphrases with the same meaning;

- During the second reduction, the remaining text material is carefully summarized.

To ensure intersubjective traceability, the analysis units are described below. These consist of a coding unit, context unit and evaluation unit. The coding unit describes the smallest text component that can be evaluated in relation to a category (Kuckartz, 2014; Schreier, 2012). The context unit forms the largest text component that can be evaluated in relation to a category (Kuckartz, 2014). During the past decades, selling centers have become an important structural element when it comes to customer/supplier interactions (Jelinek & Jelinek, 2010). Forming such selling centers enables suppliers to combine resources and power from different functional areas for sales presentations and negotiations with these buying centers (Brashear, Yang, Brashear, & Boles, 2011), which an individual sales person would lack (Weitz & Bradford, 1999).

This paper contributes to the growing attention selling centers receive from both business and the scientific community. It answers the research question of when and under which circumstances experts are willing to invest enough time in participating in selling centers despite their regular daily work. Therefore, relevant framework conditions were explored in a qualitative study with  $N=12$  selling center participants. By implementing these framework conditions in selling centers, sales departments can attract motivated experts and thus remain competitive in the fight for customers against competitor selling centers. In addition, possible concerns are discussed in this paper, which may go hand in hand with implementing these framework conditions during selling center formation. In particular, interdependencies between sales departments and other corporate divisions involved in the process are addressed during this discussion.

## 2. Literature Review

This chapter will briefly outline the concept of selling centers before going deeper into the current state of research. Selling centers are a type of team selling (Moon & Gupta, 1997) and considered a special form of project teams (Yang, Brashear, & Boles, 2011). The selling center concept is derived from the more popular buying center concept and consists of everyone involved in the acquisition and negotiation process from a supplier's perspective (Ingram, LaForge, Schwepker, & Williams, 2012). Like the creation of buying centers, organizations use selling centers, in particular when they are facing a sales process with a certain degree of complexity (Pinker &

Shumsky, 2000), or in the case of major or important customers (Moon & Armstrong, 1994).

An inherent characteristic of selling centers is the intended alignment of their sales processes with the purchasing processes of buying centers (Johnston & Marshall, 2013). Therefore, it is crucial that the roles and skills represented in buying centers are, in fact, reflected in selling centers (Kothandaraman, Agnihotri, & Anderson, 2011). This is why selling center participants can be both sales and non-sales employees from other functional areas (Moon & Armstrong, 1994). Depending on the complexity of the acquisition and negotiation process, the likelihood that different representatives of relevant functional areas need to be involved increases (Hutt, Johnston, & Ronchetto, 1985). According to Moon and Gupta (1997), the more participants which are involved in a selling center, the more responsive a supplier is perceived to be from the customer's perspective. In general, the trend leads to an increasing number of participants within customer supplier interactions. According to Wixom (2018), the number of individuals involved in purchase processes rose from 5.4 to 6.8 between 2014 and 2016 which, in turn, affects the number of selling center participants on the supplier's side. However, an increasing number of selling center participants being required can lead to considerable challenges for sales departments. Required experts from other departments must be willing to provide time capacities and be managed efficiently by the respective sales manager. In practice, managing relationships with the selling center participants which are involved is even more of a concern for sales managers than the successful sales deal with the customer (Spekman & Johnston, 1986). These challenges create a range of areas of research potential.

However, up to the current point in time, team selling is not understood well and there is not a great deal of existing literature (Jones, Dixon, Chonko, & Cannon, 2005; Mullins & Pangapoulos, 2018). Nevertheless, a considerable number of aspects related to selling center management have recently been addressed by some meaningful research work. Studies on increasing team selling effectiveness and sales success (Caldarola, 2011; Workmann, Homburg, & Jensen, 2003), management of conflict within selling centers (Wyld, 2015), building trust between selling center participants (Smith & Barclay, 1993), ensuring internal knowledge transfer among selling center participants (Yang, Alejandro, & Boles, 2011), understanding relationship patterns with customer service and marketing (Claro & Ramos, 2018), implementing a value-based selling approach (Terho, Haas, Eggert, & Ulaga, 2012) or patterns of group sales processes (Hutt, Johnston, & Ronchetto, 1985) have been contributed to the field and provide us with a better understanding of the management and group dynamics of selling centers.

When it comes to forming selling centers, however, there is still a lack of literature that examines which framework conditions must exist to attract experts from other departments in order to participate in selling centers. Simply inviting these experts is not enough. The responsible sales manager must ensure that these representatives invest enough time, despite their day-to-day business, and participate appropriately in the selling center (Ingram, LaForge, Schwepker, & Williams, 2012; Johnston & Marshall, 2013). This is where this study contributes to the field by exploring framework conditions that favor voluntary participation in selling centers.

### 3. Research Methods and Results

#### 3.1. Research Method

The research method consists of data collection, data reduction and category formation, which is explained in detail below.

This cross-sectional study was designed to explore factors that favor voluntary participation in selling centers. Between August 18th, 2018 and September 16th, 2018, individual semi-structured interviews with N=12 participants located in Germany were conducted. Semi-structured interviews give the interviewer the opportunity to go into more depth on text passages which are relevant for the interviewees while avoiding restricting responses (Bremsen & Dybkjaer, 2009; Dantzer & Hunter, 2000; Huss, 2009). Thus, semi-structured interviews combine the advantages of open and standardized interviews, while merely accepting the disadvantage of a complex and time-consuming evaluation (Sacks & Allsop, 2005; Schensul, Schensul & LeCompte, 1999).

Eight men and four women were interviewed separately during face-to-face interview sessions. Existing selling center participation experience was the qualification criteria for joining this study. The interviewees stated that they had already taken part in 12 to 200 selling centers. The interviewees were between 21 and 50 years old, with an arithmetic average of 32 years. Four interviewees had already gained experience as sales managers with responsibility for a selling center in the past.

After an introduction phase, each participant was asked to describe their previous experiences of participating in selling centers. This narrative impulse supports remembering various aspects of an experienced event (Dodson et al., 2015). As a next step, participants were asked to describe circumstances in which they would voluntarily participate in a selling center. Participants were, for example, able to discuss internal structures within the selling center as well as external conditions but were not

limited to; Schreier, 2012). The evaluation unit determines which texts are analyzed (Kuckartz, 2014; Schreier, 2012). For processing the text material, the single word was used as coding unit, paragraphs of the explicit answer as the context unit and the transcript of the respective participant as the evaluation unit.

In order to support the scientific quality of this survey, the intracoder reliability as well as the semantic validity were thoroughly examined. Intracoder reliability refers to the stability of the data which is analyzed (Carvalho & Melo, 2016). It was checked by a randomly selected interview that was re-entered into the qualitative content analysis. This was conducted after a period of 13 days by the same coder as it is recommended to wait at least one week (Kretschmer, 2008). The semantic validity is checked by examining whether the text material could also be assigned to other categories (Krippendorf, 2013). Therefore, all existing generalizations were reviewed during this process. Consequently, none of the categories had to be removed, nor were any of them considered redundant during this review process.

#### 3.2. Results

Five framework conditions which favor voluntary participation in selling centers were identified. These were the existence of performance incentives, project transparency, availability of resources, goal orientation of the selling center and collegiality and affiliation within the selling center. The category formation in accordance with existing literature is defined as follows:

- *Performance incentives* are all positive measures that are supposed to trigger motivation-oriented behavior (Raab, Goddard and Unger, 2016; Hoffmann, 2015; Churchill and Frankiewicz, 2006).

- *Project transparency* exists when all employees have access to all relevant information for the project (Eckstein, 2013, Forssbaeck & Oxelheim, 2015, McCarter & White, 2013). This means that decisions are comprehensible (Fleming & Chamberlin, 2016), problems and mistakes will be communicated (George & Vardanega, 2014; Marchand, Kettinger, & Rollins, 2000) or databases with shared access rights (Sinha, 2012) can be used by selling center participants involved.

- According to Lent (2013), *resources* can be grouped into the categories of people, materials and infra-structure like equipment, IT systems, knowledge and funds.

- *Goal orientation* means that people set performance goals and direct their actions so that these goals can be achieved (Barnett, 2013). According to Kuratko (2008), goal orientation also means that priorities and measures are pursued which are most likely to contribute to achieving this goal.

• *Collegiality and affiliation* within a team mean that teammates respect each other, can rely on each other, that problems and professional issues can be discussed openly and that there is an open exchange of information and knowledge sharing (Durlak, Domitrovich, Weissberg, & Gullotta, 2015). Furthermore, according to Cipriano (2018), collegiality is also defined as cooperation and collective responsibility by each member of a group of colleagues.

Table 1 shows the results of the frequency analysis. The task of the frequency analysis was to analyze the number of codes that were generated during the qualitative content analysis as well as the number of participants who had mentioned the respective factors. It should be noted that the results of qualitative studies do not ensure statistical representativeness due to the small sample size used (Morgan, 2013). However, these results indicate the significance of factors for the respective interviewees (Paley, 2017). As can be seen in the frequency analysis, at least two-thirds of all participants to all participants agreed, depending on the factor, that this plays a role in voluntary participation in selling centers. It is also clear that the factor of project transparency was mentioned particularly frequently.

**Table 1:** Frequency analysis per main category

Main Category	Number of Codes	Number of participants
Performance incentives	26	10
Project transparency	61	12
Resources	20	8
Goal orientation	13	10
Collegiality and affiliation	39	10

## 4. Discussion

The results of this study showed that the five factors: performance incentives, project transparency, resources, goal-orientation and collegiality and affiliation within a team contribute to the decision of whether employees from other functional areas voluntarily participate in a selling center. The individual factors are also discussed in the literature. However, concerns about these factors also to be discussed when implementing them.

### 4.1. Performance incentives

Performance incentives are more relevant in interfirm contexts than in intrafirm contexts (Venkatesh, Kohli, & Zaltman, 1995). This makes them particularly interesting for selling centers. Performance incentives address either personal or professional goals of project participants

(Zaugg, 2009). These goals are considered important factors when it comes to generating voluntary participation (Scaffa & Reitz, 2020). However, with the exception of the internal customer/supplier model, according to Brown, Evans, Mantrale, and Challagalla (2013), there are very few approaches that deal with rewarding cross-functional selling teams. Therefore, sales managers face the challenge of adapting a suitable approach from the little information which is available for the respective selling center.

### 4.2. Transparency

According to Tanner, Ahearne, Leigh, Mason, and Moncrief (2005), simply managing knowledge through just one sales associate without distributing it to the experts involved in the sales process is considered inadequate. Furthermore, the impact of transparency on the success of selling centers has already been highlighted in the literature, for example in Lai and Yang (2017). The creation of transparency also has advantages for the area of leadership within a selling center. While sharing information within selling centers it is more likely to successfully influence the experts involved (Claro, Neto, & Claro, 2013, as cited in Kothandaranman, Agnihotri, & Dingus, 2014, p. 147). A lack of transparency, in turn, leads to less willingness to identify with a project and thus less motivation to volunteer for it.

One way in which to share information in a selling center is, for example, using collaborative work platforms and CRM systems. Information that is distributed with such formal, open, shared and traceable platforms has additional positive effects on the internal alignment of fluid sales teams and their success (Lai & Yang, 2017). However, the literature also discusses negative aspects of transparency. The increased demands on the breadth, depth and speed of communication lead to the risk of overloading sales managers (Jones, Brown, Zoltners, & Weitz, 2005). Thus, in order to managing these demands, a sales manager needs to acquire appropriate skills to help them communicate in an efficient way with the customer and selling center (Puri, 1992).

### 4.3. Resources

Availability of resources is a critical factor when it comes to interdisciplinary sales processes (Dixon & Tanner, 2012). The significance of resources for sales projects becomes clear when they are not available to the required extent as a lack of resources is considered a key reason for the failure of projects, according to the Standish Group (Shoemaker, Drommi, & Norfleet, 2018). However, not only material resources are critical for the project success of selling centers. In addition, a lack of immaterial resources

such as specialized knowledge can lead to negative impacts, such as a failed reflection of purchase processes by selling centers. A lack of resources leads to distraction and overtime records within project teams (Krebs, 2014; Levitt, 2013; van Loon, 2004). This, in turn, can prevent voluntary participation in selling centers. However, despite their significance in terms of voluntary participation, project managers and project teams do not have good access to internal resources in practice (van Loon, 2004).

#### 4.4. Goal orientation

According to Singh (2016), a sales process can either be sales-oriented or customer-oriented. If a sales project is goal-oriented, the priority is usually the successful sale of a product or service. However, in addition to the successful completion of a sales process as an external goal, there may also be internal goals. According to Kothandaranman, Agnihotri, and Dingus (2014), an internal goal may, for example, be the reduction of costs. If the sales process is customer-oriented, the selling center primarily wants to meet the customer's needs and sell them the products and services with the highest possible benefit, regardless of turnover or margin. In this study, the interviewees preferred a goal-oriented approach in order to participate voluntarily in selling centers. Selling center participants must invest time capacities that are no longer available to manage their own area of responsibility. Therefore, it is understandable that participants want these time capacities to contribute to the achievement of a concrete goal. In practice, the focus on goals, while also addressing customer inquiries, orchestrating resources and the existence of organizational boundaries, confronts sales managers with the challenge of a role overload (Brown, Evans, Mantrala, & Challagalla, 2005).

#### 4.5. Collegiality and affiliation

A sense of belonging to a group has positive impacts on participants of this group in terms of acceptance of common goals as well as an increased likelihood of adopting the group's behavior (Dubin, 1987). This is certainly one of the reasons why collegiality and affiliation to a group has already been discussed as a factor which contributes to the team selling effectiveness of selling centers, for example in Achrol, Scheer and Stern (1990, as cited in Smith & Barclay 1997, p. 4). If a sense of belonging to a group cannot be established, this results in a lack of commitment to the respective task and common group goal (Bushe & Chu, 2011). One problem which fluid teams like selling centers face is that individuals are uncertain whether the contributions of their colleagues really support achieving the team goal in a sufficient manner. These

concerns avoid establishing a sense of belonging to this selling center team. This is why Bushe and Chu (2011) suggest making each individual's contribution as transparent as possible in order to support a sense of belonging. This can be achieved, as discussed in chapter 5.2., for example by establishing transparency through a CRM system, which is used during the entire sales process by the participants.

#### 4.6. Limitations of this study

Before covering the implications for practice and research, there are some limitations of this study which need to be addressed. As this study was carried out exclusively in Germany, intercultural differences are possible and cannot be excluded. Furthermore, qualitative research methods are associated with a higher risk of subjectivity than quantitative research methods. A misinterpretation of data can never be completely ruled out within qualitative research. However, the qualitative content analysis offers the advantage that it is methodologically comprehensible and produces intersubjectively verifiable results (Ruckdäschel, 2015; Teuteberg, Hempel, & Schebek, 2019). As a further measure to reduce the risks of subjectivity, various methods for checking the scientific quality were used, as mentioned above.

#### 4.7. Conclusion

Interacting with a buying center often presents sales managers with the challenge of attracting participants from their own organization to participate in a selling center. This paper presented five factors for positively influencing willingness to participate in a selling center, which may help sales managers with this challenge.

The discussion section shows that, in practice, support from the organization is needed in order to get access to these factors in practice. Therefore, awareness must be created that these factors are critical to the success of customer acquisition and thus will bring competitive advantages. Puri (1992) suggests that sales managers should present the concept of the selling center to the senior management of their organization in order to create this awareness. This shows that the role of sales managers as sellers must develop more and more into the role of sales project managers. Like project managers for other projects, they have to fight for internal support and resources, strengthen the sense of belonging among their selling center participants and create transparency through communication management.

This study raises various potential for future research: according to Zikmund, Alessandro, Winzar, Lowe, and

Babin (2017) as well as Zeegers and Barron (2015), qualitative research is not able to conclusively prove these rules. Therefore, future research could use quantitative methods to check the significance of these framework conditions using an appropriate sample size. Future research work could also, for example, explore how sales managers can grow into the role of sales project managers and how organizations can align their processes and corporate culture even more with the formation processes of selling centers.

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