

Doctoral Student Paper

**The Impact of Sales Knowledge Acquisition
on Adaptiveness: A Scoping Study**

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The Impact of Sales Knowledge Acquisition on Adaptiveness: A Scoping Study

1. Abstract

Purpose: This research investigates transformational learning as a mechanism for sales knowledge acquisition and its impact on adaptiveness.

Design/methodology/approach: The authors present a scoping study of the fields of sales training, sales-related knowledge, learning theories, and adaptiveness to propose a conceptual model for further empirical research.

Findings: A body of literature exists defining the impact of adaptiveness on sales performance. There is scarce research linking sales knowledge acquisition, its enabling learning mechanisms, and their impact on adaptiveness. The study proposes a conceptual framework that emphasizes contextual influences and their impact on knowledge acquisition. Further, the model proposes self-directed learning as a moderator on the relationship between sales-related knowledge and adaptiveness.

Originality/value: This scoping study enables the identification of key dimensions to better re-imagine knowledge acquisition programs in sales to improve competence development. In particular, programmes that emphasize self-directed learning for enhanced sales-person adaptiveness.

Keywords: Sales, Sales Competence, Sales Learning, Transformational Learning, Adaptiveness

Paper type: Conceptual paper

2. Introduction

The current model of sales knowledge acquisition is widely referred to as *sales training*. Companies spent approx. \$96B annually on sales training in 2021, averaging \$2,020 per salesperson (Association Talent Development), which is 20% higher than other functions. Sales training is big business, yet when it comes to equipping sales teams with relevant knowledge the ROI is disappointing. Studies indicate that participants forget more than 70 per cent of the information they were taught within 90 days, and this was proved (Ebbinghaus, 1885), a century ago. However, sales, in particular, seeks “quick fixes” and ignore the evidence of current data reinforcing Ebbinghaus (Harvard Business Review, 2017). In developing this paper to better understand alternatives to sales “training” the authors present a scoping study of existing research into sales training, learning theories and adaptiveness. The paper proposes further research into the process by which sales knowledge is acquired, using a sales apprenticeship as a case study programme. Using this programme the authors define *sales knowledge* as the curriculum of the sales apprenticeship promoted by the British Government (Institute for Apprenticeships, 2021)

Currently, how sales training is designed and delivered often follows a process that starts from an organisation identifying an issue in their sales ecosystems e.g. margin erosion, then

seeking proposals from sales training organisations for a solution e.g. negotiation training, and then this training is subsequently ‘imposed’ on all salespeople regardless of prior learning and knowledge. This practice operates against decades of research on adult learning theories learning and development despite being largely ineffective (Artis & Harris, 2007; Bolander, 2015). Knowledge acquisition is personal and is motivated through choice, recognition and reward. Existing practices in sales training programs do not provide sufficient choice recognition or reward.

This paper presents a scoping study that argues for changes in sales knowledge acquisition to maximise impact on adaptiveness. Transformational learning theory is featured as an appropriate mechanism to bring about knowledge acquisition in an adaptive manner. The relationship between adaptiveness’ and salesperson performance, is well established (Verbeke, 2011), and is found to be the number 2 factor ($\beta.27$) following sales-related knowledge ($\beta.28$). By researching the strength of the relationship between sales knowledge acquisition and adaptiveness, it is expected that current sales training practices can be transformed.

The paper is structured in three parts, first, it examines current sales, training models. Second, we describe learning theories supporting sales knowledge acquisition models, using the apprenticeship process as a case study of effective learning design that leads to knowledge acquisition. This section also investigates the underlying learning theories, supporting knowledge acquisition in sales. Finally, the paper examines the current evidence of the relationship between sales knowledge and adaptiveness, proposing possible moderating factors. Finally, a conceptual model is presented for future research.

3. Current sales “training” models: overview and limitations

Organisational, financial or operational underperformance often trigger the desire for training interventions in sales organisations. The authors do not imply sales training is substandard, nor that it can’t have an impact, but contend that enhanced knowledge acquisition programs enable more complete sales related knowledge for salespeople. Three issues are associated with the low effectiveness of traditional sales training and the often-suboptimal ROI achieved in these interventions. Assuming that the cause of the margin issue is a sales skill deficiency highlights the first issue – misdiagnosis. Sales training organisations will respond to the request for providing negotiation skills in a tender received. The second issue is the belief that every seller needs improvement in that skill – an individual’s capability is unconsidered. The cause of margin erosion may be aggressive competition, or poor qualification earlier in the sales process – thus making the causation assumption the last issue. Developing the example – some salespeople may have completed negotiation skills training previously. Often, a previous employer may have identified the same is required given companies have similar objectives and realities. In such a case the knowledge simply needs resurfacing and coaching, not necessarily in-depth training. The provision of that training may demotivate a salesperson and thus be ineffective.

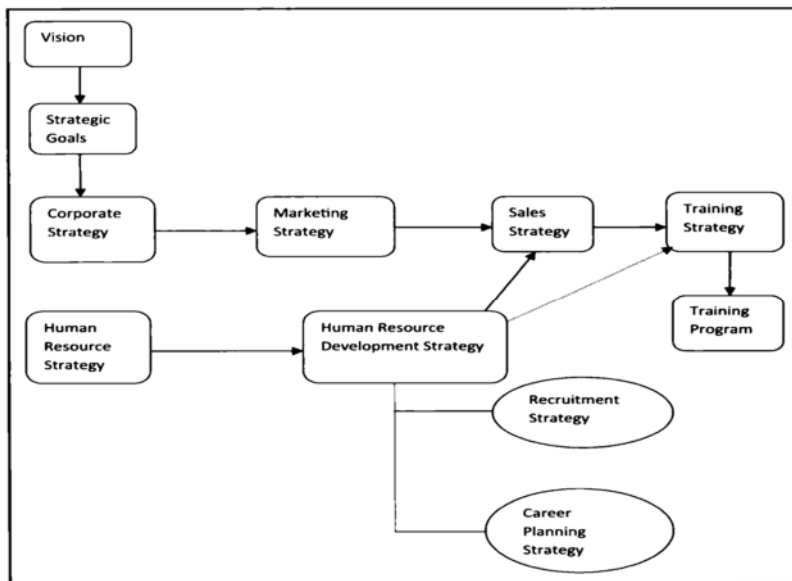


Figure 1. Example organisational sales training model. Ross 2014.

Sales training solutions can be of high quality but tend to be disconnected from the context of required and relevant sales-related knowledge. Most training solutions are answering a specific problem for a company and focus consequently on one element of sales competency as shown in figure 1, (Ross, 2014). The model exemplifies the process by which sales training programs are typically developed within organisations. Focusing on a specific business issue, organisational training ignores competence frameworks and thus, reduces sales-related knowledge acquisition potential.

Current capability against competence and perceived contextual understanding of sales by a salesperson are seldom considered and consequently a foundation for self-directed learning is missed (Artis & Harris 2007). *“No seller is equal, each having their background, views on contextual understanding and consequently approach to learning”*, (Bolander, 2015). In his research, Bolander concluded that salespeople have the potential to be effective self-learners, being task orientated, motivated and having high self-control. The sovereignty of each salesperson, their “choice in” and “ownership of” their learning is largely ignored in current sales training practice. Selling tenure creates a self-perception of contextual understanding, many sellers incorrectly equating this to capability. Those with higher self-belief in contextual understanding will prefer voluntary learning over other learning possibilities (Figure 2). The authors conclude the sales training industry to be a well-oiled and lucrative industry, but in terms of the acquisition of sales-related knowledge, it is incomplete. The knowledge acquisition process does not consider individuals, the capabilities, motivations and learning styles, which hampers the effective development of a salesperson’s adaptiveness. Adaptiveness cannot be truly achieved unless a salesperson has considerable sales-related knowledge, as suggested by (Wietz, 1978) through the ISTE model, and (Spiro & Weitz, 1990) via the ADAPTS model. The ISTE model: impression formation (I), strategy formulation (S), message transmission (T), evaluation of the effect of the sales attempt (E), and subsequent adjustment (A), proposes a process by which salespeople behave if being adaptive. ADAPT is a simple sales acronym for the steps in making a sale adaptively, Assessment | Discovery | Activation | Projection | Transition |. It particularly suits Relationship selling and so may take place over time and several meetings. The importance

of sales-related knowledge in impacting adaptiveness is highlighted (McFarland, 2019), but not widely considered in practice and is an area under-researched.

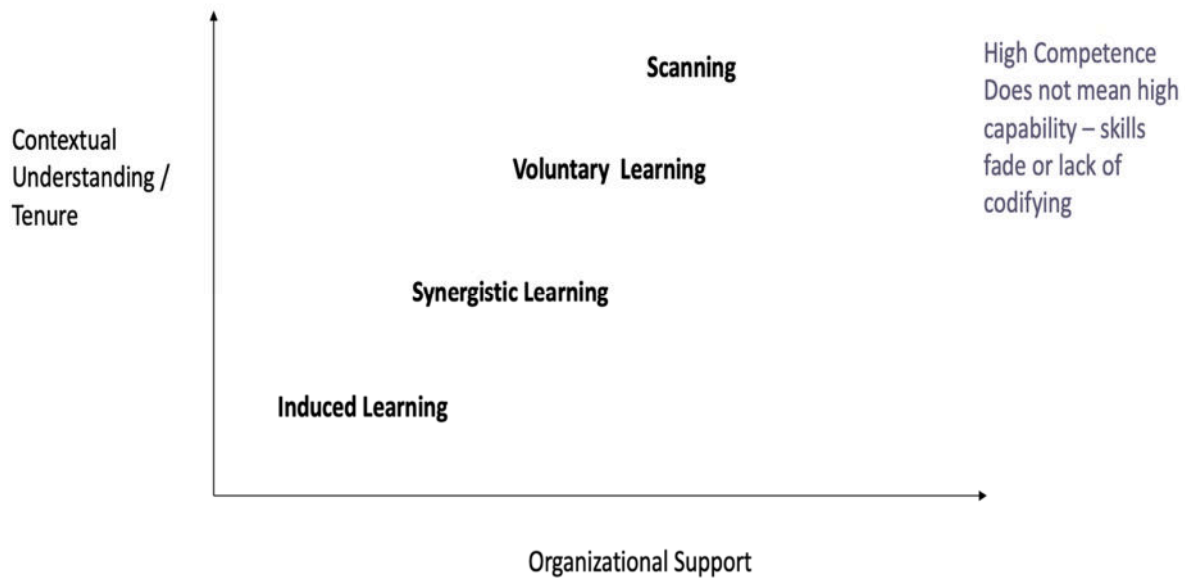


Figure 2. Contextual understanding of role and learning styles of a salesperson. (Artis & Harris 2007).

4. Exploring sales knowledge acquisition in apprenticeships

4.1 Sales apprenticeships: a case study of alternative learning theories sales knowledge acquisition

Apprenticeships have existed for thousands of years in traditional trades yet, they are a relatively new concept in modern professions such as sales. With a focus on equipping the workforce with skills for economic success, governments across the globe are re-igniting apprenticeships to increase knowledge. The UK government has created a levy on employers, to fund costs of KA against frameworks of competence. A sales apprenticeship was developed (see the previous link) which provides a comprehensive *competence* framework for professional selling. The process within apprenticeships contrasts greatly with sales training processes (Figure 3). Sales-related knowledge defined as domain knowledge underpins the process, with the methods of learning focusing on developing the individual. This change is best described: “*Something fundamental has been happening: the beginnings of a revolution that is seeing a switch away from sales training to sales education*” (Squire, 2020). The ability to provide a structured learning experience over years that interconnects themes, and allows practice and reflection shifts sales training to sales learning in the traditional higher education context. The key to the effectiveness of apprenticeships is the sequence of learning activities, following a structured process, with gradual increase of complexity and diversity and coupled with self-reflection, improves the learner’s confidence in their ability to develop capability, which then improves adaptiveness.

Content	<i>types of knowledge required for expertise</i>
Domain knowledge	subject matter specific concepts, facts, and procedures
Heuristic strategies	generally applicable techniques for accomplishing tasks
Control strategies	general approaches for directing one's solution process
Learning strategies	knowledge about how to learn new concepts, facts, and procedures
Methods	<i>ways to promote the development of expertise</i>
Modeling	teacher performs a task so students can observe
Coaching	teacher observes and facilitates while students perform a task
Scaffolding	teacher provides supports to help students perform a task
Articulation	teacher encourages students to verbalize their knowledge and thinking
Reflection	teacher enables students to compare their performance with others
Exploration	teacher invites students to pose and solve their own problems
Sequencing	<i>keys to ordering learning activities</i>
Increasing complexity	meaningful tasks gradually increasing in difficulty
Increasing diversity	practice in a variety of situations to emphasize broad application
Global to local skills	focus on conceptualizing the whole task before executing the parts
Sociology	<i>social characteristics of learning environments</i>
Situated learning	students learn in the context of working on realistic tasks
Community of practice	communication about different ways to accomplish meaningful tasks
Intrinsic motivation	students set personal goals to seek skills and solutions
Cooperation	students work together to accomplish their goals

Figure 3. Apprenticeship model (Institute of Apprenticeships).

An apprenticeship as a knowledge acquisition process is also effective because of the focus on knowledge and behaviours, facilitated by deliberate practice (Ericsson, 1992). Additional to skill and competence, traditionally facilitated by current sales training models, the apprenticeship provides a robust sequence and structure of knowledge, skill, competence and behaviours. This knowledge acquisition mechanism supports a formal sales apprenticeship, a formal (non-apprenticeship) qualification, and an informal self-directed certification process. An apprenticeship is a programme that allows the connection between different sales contexts to the required sales-related knowledge for the salesperson to perform in that context. It does so by providing standards and adopting learner-centric learning approaches. Moreover, apprenticeships are designed with a level of formality, support, time frames and continuous assessment of capability that provide a solid foundation for developing higher levels of adaptiveness. In the following section, we examine the learning theories that facilitate salesperson knowledge acquisition.

4.2 Sales knowledge acquisition: underpinning learning theories

The scoping study revealed five main learning theories and three core concepts that conform to the field of learning and knowledge acquisition (Table 1). In considering the implications for research into *how* sales knowledge is acquired, the three contexts noted in the previous section, are found to be supported by a different theory. First, apprenticeships (including sales ones) rest on *making learning visible*, which is a cognitive process. Yet social learning theory is intertwined as much as is humanism theory, particularly when considering communities of practice.

THEORY	EXPLANATION	APPLICATION
Behaviourism	As simple psychology puts it: "Behaviourism is only concerned with observable stimulus-response behaviours as they can be studied in a systematic and observable manner"	Learning is based on a system of routines that "drill" information into a students memory bank, as well as positive feedback from teachers and an educational institution itself. If students do an excellent job, they receive positive reinforcement and are signalled out for recognition.

Cognitivism	Learning relies on both external factors (Like information or data) and the internal thought process.	Developed in the 1950s, this theory moves away from behaviourism to focus on the mind's role in learning. According to the International Bureau of Education: "in cognitive psychology. Learning is understood as the acquisition of knowledge: the learner is an information processor who absorbs information, undertakes cognitive operations on it and stocks it in memory".
Constructivism	The learner builds upon his or her previous experience and understanding to "construct" a new understanding.	"The passive view of teaching views the learner as "an empty vessel" to be filled with knowledge", explains Simply Psychology, "whereas constructivism states that learners construct meaning only through active engagement with the world (such as experiments or real-world problem solving)."
Humanism	A " learner-centric approach" in which the potential is the focus rather than the method or materials.	With the understanding that people are inherently good, humanism focuses on creating an environment conducive to self-actualization. In doing so, learners' needs are met and they are then free to determine their own goals while the teacher assists in meeting those learning goals.
Connectivism	Informed by the digital age, connectivism departs from constructivism by identifying and remediating gaps in knowledge.	Strongly influenced by technology, connectivism focuses on a learner's ability to frequently source and update accurate information. Knowing how and where to find the best information is as important as the information itself.
Transformative modern learning theory	This theory is particularly relevant to adult learning theories learners. It posits that new information can essentially change our worldviews when our life experience and knowledge are paired with critical reflection.	Enabling the learner to challenge their perceptions of knowledge frameworks gained through experience, and previous learner interventions. The learner can enhance their understanding, improve their knowledge remain current.
Social modern learning theory	This theory incorporates some of the tacit tenets of peer pressure. Specifically, students observe other students and model their behaviour accordingly. Sometimes it's to emulate peers; other times it's to distinguish themselves from peers.	Harnessing the power of this theory involves getting students' attention, focusing on how students can retain information, identifying when it's appropriate to reproduce a previous behaviour, and determining students' motivation.
Experiential modern learning theory	There are plenty of clichés and parables about teaching someone something by doing it, it wasn't until the early 1980s that it became an official learning theory	This approach emphasizes both learning about something and experiencing it so that students can apply knowledge in real-world situations.

Table 1 . Learning theories in adult learning theories education. Compiled by author

Cognitive learning supports *induced* learning (Artis & Harris, 2007) which is a key component of formal apprenticeships, and typically but not exclusively, early-career salespeople. Experienced sellers have learnt behaviours and habits from experience, prior training and peers. To absorb new knowledge an experienced seller must challenge the current understanding of "self" and his/her existing knowledge structures. The theory of learning that promotes this approach to development is transformational learning, which supports formal non-apprenticeship and informal self-directed sales-related knowledge acquisition. Transformational learning as a theory was initially developed by (Mezirow, 1978), and focuses on the idea that learners can adjust their thinking based on new information (Marcos, 2006).

4.3 Contextual Influences and moderating factors: organisational and individual requirements for optimal knowledge acquisition

The scoping study revealed three contextual influencers for knowledge acquisition and one moderator on the relationship between

4.3.1 Transformational leadership

There is a study linking transformational leadership and its effects on salesperson performance (Goa, Murphy & Anderson, 2020) but there is scarce evidence on the effects of transformational leadership on adaptiveness. Transformational leadership has been proven to have an impact on manager/seller interpersonal relationships which in turn, impacts performance (Smith et al 2012). It influences sellers' cultural distance from the organisational, especially important in a hybrid environment post-Covid. Transformational leadership has been proved to affect psychological safety and self-efficacy in salespeople (Murphy et al, 2020). A link is made and encourages accomplishment striving in salespeople, positively affecting performance, but not via sales-related knowledge and impacting adaptiveness. The authors present transformational leadership as a contextual influencer on knowledge acquisition

4.3.2 Psychological safety

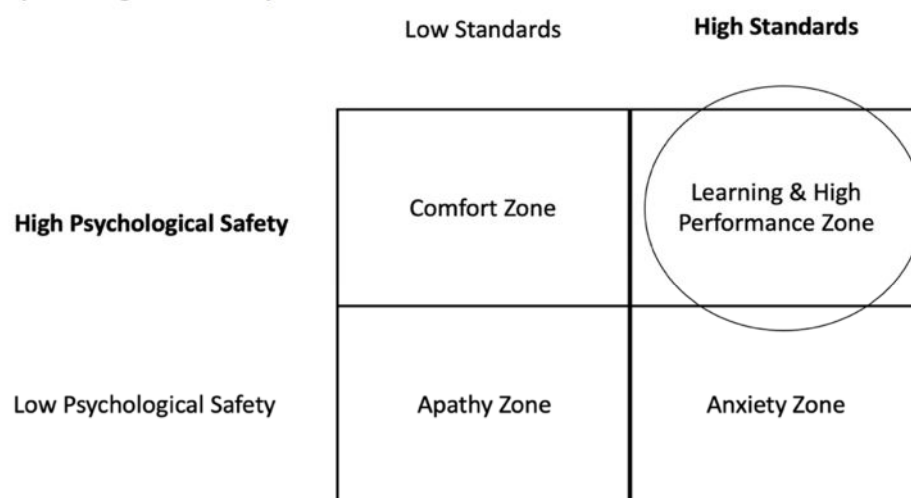


Figure 4. Source Amy C Edmondson, 2019. *Desired quadrant of organisational learning.*

Organisational learning theory highlights that psychologically safety is the vital factor for organisational and transformational learning (Anyaegebu, Izuchukwu, Ndukaihe, Nwankw & Fabian, 2021). There has been a re-emergence of interest in this phenomenon in recent years, examining the potential positive impacts for organisations. The focus on mental learning theories and employee wellbeing are accelerating research in psychological safety, but to our knowledge, no study has been conducted in the context of sales. Logically, the research into psychological safety impacts on organisational teams can be replicated contextually for sales. The impact specifically on the relationship between sales-related knowledge and adaptiveness remains unaddressed. Edmondson (2019) modelled how high psychological safety and high standards in organisations lead to high levels of learning and performance (Figure 4). In her book entitled *The Fearless Organisation*, Edmondson presented the connection between high levels of learning and high performance. Research presented in case studies showed that a psychological safety organisation promotes openness in knowledge “gaps” and enables both organisational and self-directed learning.

4.3.3 Organisational learning

The scoping study identified another moderating factor of individual knowledge acquisition, organisational learning. Organisational learning is a well-established field of study, as is its

relation to innovation and performance. Organisational learning enables learning “if” its objectives are aligned to those of the salesperson, if not, it can become a barrier to knowledge acquisition. The identification of the seller’s knowledge, experience and attitude to learning must be achieved to remove barriers to salespeople knowledge acquisition (Burns & Griffin, 2018). A link between organisational learning and workforce agility has been established (Alavi et al, 2014), who building on (Sherringham, 2007) link adaptive expertise and organisational learning. Organisation learnings effect as a moderator of the link between sales-related knowledge and adaptiveness presents an opportunity in future research.

4.3.4 Self-directed learning

Broadly, self-directed learning describes the process by which individuals take the initiative in diagnosing their learning needs, formulating goals and identifying human and material resources (Boyer, 2014). With or without assistance, they then implement self-directed learning as a process for knowledge acquisition. The research argues sellers’ high self-regulation, self-motivation and task orientation are attributes of the most successful learners in this model (Bolander, 2015). The contextual influencers could be argued as consecutive in effect in that without transformational learning, psychological cannot be created, which in turn promotes organisational learning. Self-directed learning, is a moderating factor, ultimately changing the strength of the relationship between sales-related knowledge and adaptiveness. Future research could prove that the higher the preference for owning one’s self-learning, the greater the impact on adaptiveness.

5. Adaptive capability: scoping the link to sales knowledge acquisition

Knowledge derives adaptiveness, wider knowledge increases adaptive capability, logically knowing just one “thing” is restrictive. Knowing two “things” increases adaptive options but not as much as knowing many processes, methodologies and theories provided by *deep* domain sales-related knowledge. Figure 5 shows a conceptual model that defines the linkages amongst knowledge acquisition, sales-related knowledge and the degree of adaptiveness of the salesperson. Research conducted at Florida State University (FSU 2018) concluded that top-performing sellers were adaptive across over five methodologies and sales processes. The research extended the challenger model originally defined by (Dixon & Adamson, 2013), highlighting the needed degree of adaptability for sustained success in professional salespeople.

The FSU research shows that the highest performing sellers could shift ‘persona’ and adapt to over five different sales strategies depending on the context in which they work. This research is in line with that of (Miles & Snow, 1978) who proposed a model adapted by (Kwak et al, 2019), which whilst mixed in results, pointed to adaptive macro seller behaviour positively affecting salesperson performance. This is in line with research proposed by (Weitz, 1986), and (Spiro & Weitz, 1990). The authors argue that adaptiveness is facilitated through broad knowledge structures which are yet to be fully appreciated or accepted in practice. Overall, bringing together sales-related knowledge, knowledge acquisition (Keeling, Cox, & de Ruyter, 2020; Artis & Harris, 2007) and apprenticeships this scoping study allows to development of an early conceptual model that will be further developed through a systematic literature review.

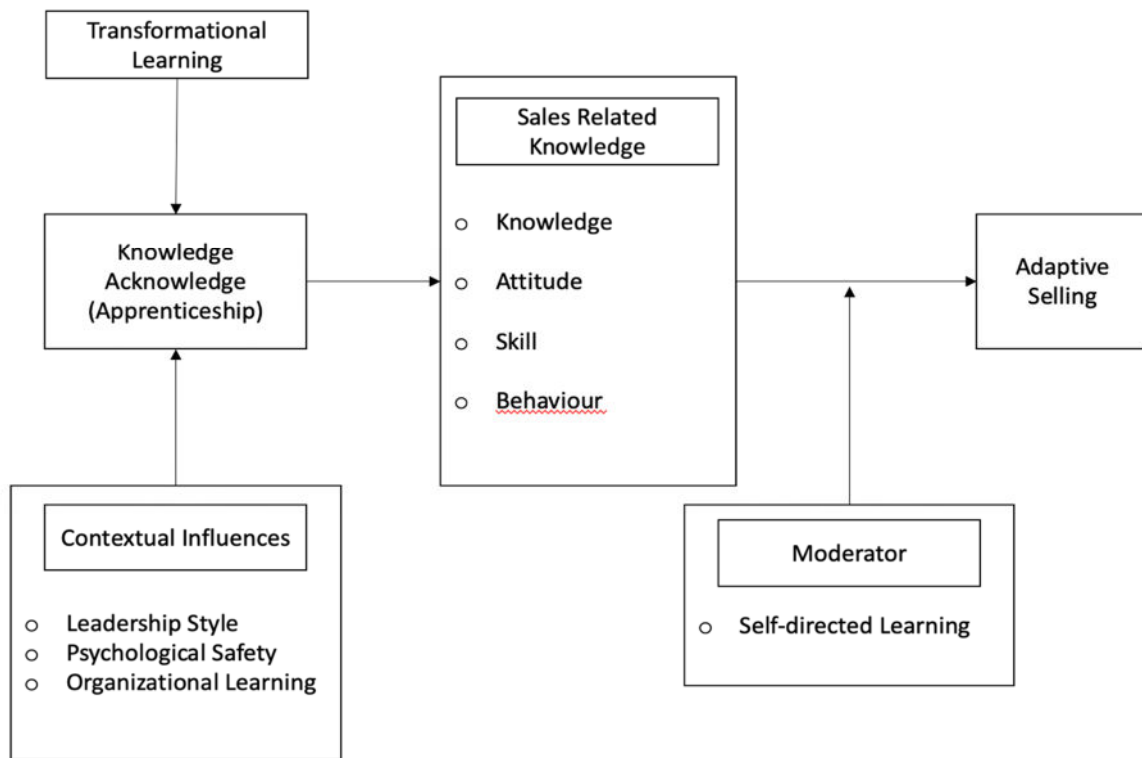


Figure 5. Proposed conceptual model.

6. Conclusion

Future research could investigate sales-related knowledge and its relationship to the adaptiveness of the salesperson. By investigating the strength of the relationship between sales-related knowledge and the adaptiveness of the salesperson as the independent variable, a study is presented for further investigation.

In future research, a further refinement of relevant contextual influencers to better understand the organisational characteristics required for better knowledge acquisition. These influencers can create barriers to knowledge acquisition as a mechanism for creating meaningful sales related knowledge. The role of transformational learning, and how it facilitates knowledge acquisition should also be researched, and how it impacts self-directed learning.

This research will contribute to practice in challenging the suboptimal effects of the current sales training model. It is envisaged that it will offer guidelines to create more engaging and rewarding models for salespeople to acquire sales-related knowledge.

Further research will provide evidence of how the apprenticeships can become the new model to bring about sales-related knowledge to better develop professional salespeople in the United Kingdom. The authors propose that a better adoption of this model will accelerate sales adaptiveness and as previously evidenced, a positive impact salesperson performance.

This research aspires to contribute to the advancement of sales management research and academia, through the increase in higher education options to support the acquisition of sales-related knowledge. These options currently exist, but at a limited level nowadays. Research showing how the models impact in practice may draw more universities to serve the increased market need.

7. References

Available on request.