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Impact of the Digitized Sales Work Environment on Customer Orientation*

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

“I wonder whether digitization and new tools [...] really help us to spend more time to think about what the customer actually needs? [...] time’s becoming fast-paced - and you’re trapped like a hamster in its wheel - and all you really do is wind things up. On the one hand, the abundance of requirements has become too large or the abundance of incoming inquiries has become too many. On the other hand, one is entangled in the many tools that are supposed to help [...]” (Sales manager, male).

Putting customer value as the ultimate goal of selling (Rackham & DeVincentis, 1999), a value-based sales approach has high practical relevance for sales performance (Terho et al., 2015) and requires sellers to have a deep understanding of their customer’s business (Terho et al., 2012). The value-creating sales approach demands frequent and detailed communication and collaboration between sellers and buyers, but also between functional departments of the seller. Research highlights the many potentials that the digitization of work environments bears (Larivière et al., 2017) for internal and external communication as well as relationship management. New technologies augment and enhance sales infrastructures, e.g., cloud-based access and blockchain are expected to increase the speed, flexibility, and quality of sales activities (Hunter & Perreault, 2007). Moreover, social media, social enterprise networks (Marshall et al., 2012), artificial intelligence (Singh et al., 2019), and virtual/augmented reality applications (Harz et al., 2021) are recognized as useful tools for salesperson communication and relationship management. Overall, studies suggest digitization allows people to work more efficiently and allow a higher focus on core activities (Larivière et al., 2017) such as customer orientation and relationship building (Hunter & Perreault, 2007).

However, research has also explored the downsides of digitization and the introduction of new technologies. The negative impact of sales and marketing technology on salespeople’s perceived job satisfaction (Lee & Park, 2008) and the resulting technostress (Tarafdar et al., 2014) and job insecurity concerns (Johnson & Bharadwaj, 2005) have darkened the favorable view on the digitized salesforce. In particular, technostress, the perceived stress of employees due to increasing exposure to digital technologies, affects the overall self-efficacy of salespeople, as well as the success of their interactions (Tarafdar et al., 2014; Hunter & Perreault, 2006). The introductory quote highlights how salespeople ponder on the up- and downsides

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of sales technology use in the digital sales work environment. On the one hand, digital technologies are meant to ease their work, on the other hand, they may feel overwhelmed by using the available tools. Moreover, salespeople are at risk to experience their work as meaningless, at least partly, due to the introduction of new technologies that may reduce the spectrum of salesperson tasks in a digitized work environment. Collaborative tools, internal social media platforms, and omnichannel communication might render many tasks easier and more efficient, but they could also lead to information overload and cognitive saturation that decreases salespeople's performance (Karr-Wisniewski & Lu 2010). Hence, the mental health of salespeople is often discussed as critically affected by the very job characteristics of sales ultimately affecting sales performance negatively (Habel et al., 2021).

Given these potential adverse work- and health-related consequences, research on how to overcome these dark sides of technology use emerged (Rohwer et al., 2022). Literature on technostress introduced inhibiting factors and add for consideration that technostress is not necessarily negative, but can also have a positive angle if it is conceived as challenging, motivating, and enriching by users (Tarafdar et al., 2019). Especially in the context of the rather contradictory potentials evoked by the digital sales work environment (DSWE), it remains unclear when digital technologies empower salespeople and when they create negative outcomes, and how this ultimately affects customer orientation and selling behavior.

Our study aims to gain further understanding of sales- and service employees' experiences of technology-induced stress in the DSWE and how it affects their customer orientation and value-based selling. Informed by appraisal theory, which highlights personal characteristics and resources as critical to the emergence of stress appraisal and adaptation (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), our study poses the following questions:

- What characterizes the DSWE?
- What is the role of the DSWE in creating salesperson distress and eustress?
- How is a salesperson's customer orientation/ value-based selling affected by the DSWE?

In our attempt to explore the potential up- and downsides of work environment digitalization and the appraisal of the pervasive use of Information Technology in everyday work, we adopted a qualitative approach. We combined information from qualitative interviews with B2B customer contact employees, namely sales professionals, sales managers, consultants, and project managers from four different corporations in Germany, with discussions from four online sales communities that built the basis for our qualitative content analysis approach (Mayring, 2014).

Our current findings show that the configurations of the DSWE as a dynamic interplay of digital technologies with customer-salesperson interactions build a rather complex basis for stress appraisals, compared to a single technology. Moreover, how salespeople appraise their engagement with digital technologies as either challenging or threatening is contingent on their characteristics. For example, handling different technologies propels the salesperson and creates feelings of either being merely reactive to technology advances or of the challenge to master adaptation in individual ways. Thereby, the DSWE can trigger both, positive and negative techno-stressors. Furthermore, we identify those positive dimensions of technostress, like flexibility, resilience, and mastery that mirror appraisals beyond the widely researched negative techno-stressors. If a techno-stressor is appraised as a threat or challenge in the DSWE determines if the salesperson experiences dis- or eustress. Our exploration highlights the interdependent and dynamic interplay of technologies with customer expectation in the

DSWE as a rather complex source of technostress emergence, which contrasts with prior research that usually attributes technostress to derive from singular technology characteristics as isolated sources. Moreover, with our study, we aim to describe the appraisals that determine how a techno-stressor is conceived as negative (distress) or positive (eustress) in the context of DSWEs.

We hereby add to the literature on technostress, explaining the positive technostress dimensions and highlighting the complexity of technostress emergence in larger digitalized work environments, but also to marketing and sales literature, by introducing technostress as a relevant measure for salespeople who are embedded in digital work environments. How this affects salesperson performance in form of customer orientation and value-based selling will be the subject of a forthcoming quantitative study among sales- and service employees.

Keywords: *Digital Work Environments, Technostress, Sales Digitalization, Qualitative*

References are available from the authors upon request.

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Nancy V. Wunderlich is Professor and Chair of Digital Markets at Technische Universität Berlin, Germany. Her research focuses on issues related to the digital transformation of organizations, the use, and design of digital technologies as well as consumer behavior in digital markets including vulnerabilities and adoption behavior. Her work has appeared in leading journals including MIS Quarterly, the Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science, the Journal of Service Research, the Journal of Retailing, and the Journal of Business Research. She has received awards from the American Marketing Association and the International Conference on Information Systems, among others.