





Business-to-Business sellers' motivations in sales performance – A six-dimensional framework proposition

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Background: Whether internal or external, motivational factors serve as stimulants influencing individual ability to execute sales tasks. A meta-analysis was conducted highlighting three broad categories of individual motivations that are imperative within the context of sales performance, namely cognitive choice, goal orientation, and work engagement. However, marketing and sales management scholars argue that there is a need for further research exploring the influence of intrinsic and extrinsic motivational factors on overall sales performance in multiple business settings.

Aim: The aim of the study is to test a six-dimensional framework of business-to-business (B2B) sellers' motivations in sales performance.

Setting: The application of a six-dimensional framework on sales performance within a Norwegian context. Different companies from multiple industries operating in the product-orientated sector of Norway were selected to measure the relevance of the six-dimensional framework to sales performance in these companies.

Method: In total, 236 usable questionnaires representing multiple industries of different sizes across Norway were used. Data were collected using self-administered questionnaires.

Results: The findings indicate that the dimensions of B2B sellers' motivations are relevant in a B2B sales setting. Therefore, sales businesses operating in a B2B environment need to become increasingly aware that motivations drive sellers to achieve their goals.

Conclusion: The study offers an increased understanding on how to structure B2B sellers' motivations in a six-dimensional framework, including cognitive choice, goal orientation, and work engagement.

Contribution: The study develops an improved understanding of the intrinsic and extrinsic motivational factors that influence the sales performance of B2B sellers. Furthermore, it contributes to an increased understanding of how to structure B2B sellers' motivations in a six-dimensional framework.

Keywords: e-sales performance; cognitive choice; goal orientation; work engagement; job involvement; B2B.

Introduction

Since the dawn of the new millennium, sales performance has become an important area of research exploration in the business-to-business (B2B) and sales fields (Javalgi, Hall & Cavusgil 2014; Mai & Liao 2022; Zallocco, Bolman Pullins & Mallin 2009). The growing interest in sales performance is largely due to the significant role played by direct selling in the business-to-business (B2B) marketing domain (Itani, Agnihotri & Dingus 2017). Business-to-business selling is a complex process and the sales performance of B2B sellers drives their future profitability in a competitive and constantly evolving environment (Rangarajan et al. 2022). Successful salespeople are vital to the future survival of B2B sellers and directly influence their ability to grow sales potential through positive relational engagement (Bowen et al. 2021; Wang et al. 2019). Consequently, scholars (e.g. Aydin, Koc & Kaya 2017; Terho, Giovannetti & Cardinali 2022) are calling for a deeper understanding of the factors guiding sellers' motivations to strengthen overall sales performance in a B2B context. Düzgün, Telli and Telli (2019) and Shin et al. (2021) argued that an understanding of the motivational elements of sales performance is significant for sales force management, since B2B sellers' future sales success is influenced by

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their employees' sales performance (Homburg, Hohenberg & Hahn 2019). Yet, a gap remains in B2B literature concerning the dimensions that impact the motivations of sellers' sales performance in a B2B context.

Whether internal or external, motivational factors serve as stimulants influencing individual ability to execute sales tasks (Abbasi, Goh & Ariffin 2019; Fu et al. 2017; Suen et al. 2022). A meta-analysis of the research work of Churchill et al. (1985) and Verbeke, Dietz and Verwaal (2011) highlighted three broad categories of individual motivations that are imperative within the context of sales performance, namely cognitive choice, goal orientation, and work engagement. Within these categories, Churchill et al. and Verbeke et al. identified six motivational dimensions of motivation, namely spending time on planning, salesperson's intrinsic motivation, performance goal orientation, salesperson's output productivity, enthusiasm, and job involvement. Scholars, such as Geng and Pelton (2022) and Good, Hughes and Wang (2022b), confirm the need for further research exploring the influence of intrinsic and extrinsic motivational factors as drivers of sales performance in multiple business settings. This is especially important considering that previous research concerning the drivers of sales performance has explored such drivers primarily from a buyer's perspective (Barry & Girona 2018; Guenther & Guenther 2020; Mullins, Menguc & Panagopoulos 2020). Yet, sellers are critical partners in a B2B relationship and it becomes increasingly important to also explore their perspective in the B2B relationship-building process (Kauffman & Pointer 2022).

The key role sellers play in a B2B context cannot be underestimated, since they function as a link between manufacturers and business buyers (Koponen & Rytsy 2020; Mai & Liao 2022). Thus, a seller's perspective is becoming increasingly important to explore, due to the competitive nature of the B2B sales environment (Rodriguez et al. 2022b). Considering the critical role played by motivational factors (intrinsic and extrinsic) in overall performance, the study tests a six-dimensional framework of B2B sellers' motivations in sales performance. The need for the study is also supported by the contemporary call from Jaramillo et al. (2007) for the advancement of knowledge in the sales domain.

It should be noted that the seminal work of Churchill et al. (1985) and Verbeke et al. (2011) on sales performance only partially uncovered the importance of the effect of intrinsic and extrinsic motivational factors on sales performance. No prior studies have explored the significance of the influence of motivational factors on sales performance in a B2B context. To address this research gap, further research is required to secure an enhanced understanding of the intrinsic and extrinsic motivational factors that can impact sales performance in a competitive B2B environment (Matthews & Edmondson 2022). This is especially needed considering that motivational factors directly influence the total sales effectiveness of B2B sellers in an open market (Buciuniene & Skudiene 2009; Herjanto & Franklin 2019). Thus, this study perceives motivational factors (intrinsic and extrinsic) to be

indicative of sales performance from the perspective of a seller in a competitive B2B marketplace.

This study contributes to sales management theory and the sales industry by developing a B2B framework of motivational indicators of sales performance. Hence, the study tests a six-dimensional framework of B2B sellers' motivations in sales performance. Therefore, the study validates the seminal work of Churchill et al. (1985) and Verbeke et al. (2011) on the motivational indicators of sales performance. Through such a validation, sales managers are given insights and direction regarding the intrinsic and extrinsic elements of motivation that should be considered within a B2B context. Moreover, this study adds value to the sales management theory and industry by exploring the six-dimensional framework of motivation from a seller's perspective in a B2B setting. This is significant, considering that the largest portion of B2B research on sales performance is conducted from a buyer's perspective.

The article starts with a brief outline of the need for the study and the contribution it makes. This is followed by an orientation towards the research meta-analysis that informs the research gap being explored. In addition, the theoretical foundation is provided to support the formulated aim for the study, the methodology applied, as well as the results flowing from the data analysis conducted. The article concludes with a focused discussion on the results and the proposed recommendations.

Research meta-analysis informing the research gap explored

It was the groundbreaking work of Churchill et al. (1985), founded on an analysis of Walker et al. (1977), that highlighted motivation as a critical element of sales performance (refer to Table 1). Their seminal work explored 409 citations from 63 journals and identified motivation as one of four drivers guiding the sales performance of sales personnel. However, Churchill et al. could not secure an in-depth analysis of the different categories of motivation that influence salespeople's sales performance. Thus it was the research work of Verbeke et al. (2011) that categorised the drivers of sales performance with a strong alignment with the motivation of salespeople. These seminal authors explored 389 studies and various drivers of sales performance that reflect a strong focus on motivational categories, such as cognitive choice, goal orientation, and work engagement. It was the revolutionary research work of Verbeke et al. that called for a more comprehensive exploration of the motivation categories impacting future sales performance. Scholars (e.g., Buciuniene & Skudiene 2009; Conde, Prybutok & Thompson 2021; De Jong et al. 2021) concur, stating that salespeople's motivations are imperative in driving their overall sales performance. Consequently, further exploration of motivation as a driver of sales performance is required.

Considering the meta-analysis on sales performance indicated in Table 1, it is asserted that motivational indicators of sales performance can assist sales managers regarding

TABLE 1: Meta-analysis literature reviews.

Source	Approach	Outcome
Walker et al. (1977)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Classifies a number of individual, interpersonal, organisational, and environmental factors that can impact the overall motivation and job performance of a salesperson 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Proposes an outline of integrated factors that in the past have been perceived as being independent in their influence on salesperson performance in sales management literature. Motivation components, such as 'straight salary' and 'commission', are studied in detail. Focuses on psychological mechanisms, which work to motivate sales effort and performance. Expectancy theories of motivation.
Churchill et al. (1985)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Articles assessed between 1918 and 1982 409 citations from 63 journals 116 studies covered sufficient knowledge to be counted in the meta-analysis In total: 1653 observations Determinants of salespeople's performance 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Determinants rank (ordered amount correlation): (1) personal factors, (2) skill, (3) role variables, (4) aptitude, (5) motivation, and (6) organisational/ environmental factors. Strength of the relationship between the major determinants and salespeople's performance is influenced by the category of products salespeople put up for sale
Verbeke et al. (2011)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Synthesises empirical evidence from 1982 to 2008 389 studies 121 research works were disregarded Approximations of both the prognostic authenticity of the Walker et al. (1977) subcategories and the impact of a range of moderators on determinant-sales performance relationships. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Five subcategories demonstrate significant relationships with sales performance: (1) selling-related knowledge, (2) degree of adaptiveness, (3) role ambiguity, (4) cognitive aptitude, and (5) work engagement. Subcategories are moderated by measurement method, research context, and sales type variables.

Source: Walker, Jr. O.C., Churchill, Jr. G.A. & Ford, N.M., 1977, 'Motivation and performance in industrial selling: Present knowledge and needed research', *Journal of Marketing Research* 14(2), 156–168. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00222437701400203>; Churchill, Jr. G.A., Ford, N.M., Hartley, S.W. & Walker, Jr. O.C., 1985, 'The determinants of salesperson performance: A meta-analysis', *Journal of Marketing Research* 22(2), 103–118. <https://doi.org/10.1177/002224378502200201>; Verbeke, W., Dietz, B. & Verwaal, E., 2011, 'Drivers of sales performance: A contemporary meta-analysis. Have salespeople become knowledge brokers?', *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science* 39(3), 407–428. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11747-010-0211-8>

which categories and dimensions of motivation to focus on. However, such an exploration is secured from the perspective of a seller in a B2B context. Sales management literature has published broadly from a buyer's perspective (Bolman Pullins et al. 2000; Good et al. 2022a; Kalra, Briggs & Schrock 2023), and numerous researchers have called for further studies in B2B sales from a seller's perspective (Høgevoid et al. 2022; Mai & Liao 2021; Ohiomah, Benyoucef & Andreev 2020). Furthermore, the important role played by sellers in a B2B relationship has been broadly acknowledged in sales management literature (Ohiomah et al. 2020; St Clair et al. 2018). Such acknowledgement relates specifically to sellers' engagement role as B2B salespeople with B2B customers, emphasising their critical role in the B2B sales process (Guesalaga 2016). Scholars (e.g. Lam, DeCarlo & Sharma 2019) concur, arguing in favour of value-driven customer engagement between B2B sellers and their customer base when making sales.

Through a customer-centred approach towards sales performance, salespeople should secure a value-driven outcome for all parties when making a sale (Latinovic &

Chatterjee 2022; Ulaga 2018). Understanding that B2B buyers want to benefit from the sales, B2B sellers can develop sale strategies that will align with the product and service expectations of their business buyers (Paesbrugge et al. 2018). As such, salespeople's motivations are imperative in securing a profitable sales outcome for B2B sellers, since these sales individuals directly engage with B2B buyers to make sales (Good et al. 2022a). To address this research gap, a stronger emphasis is required on the dimensions that influence the sales performance of salespeople, who are an inherent part of the sales strategy of the B2B seller. Moreover, salespeople are responsible for the professional management of B2B customers and the development of an in-depth understanding of the needs and expectations of B2B buyers (Peñalba-Aguirrezabalaga et al. 2021). By doing so, mutual understanding towards sales expectations is secured and the sales profitability of the B2B seller is improved (Good & Schwepker 2022; Rusthollkarhu, Hautamaki & Aarikka-Stenroos 2021).

Objectives

Emanating from the research meta-analysis, this study aims to examine a six-dimensional framework of B2B sellers' motivations in sales performance. The following secondary objectives were formulated to assist in addressing the primary research objective:

- To provide empirical evidence of sales performance on the research works of Churchill et al. (1985) and Verbeke et al. (2011) to identify different dimensions from both meta-analyses that could underpin the six-dimensional framework in the context of sales performance proposed in the study.
- To test the six-dimensional framework of B2B sellers' motivations in the context of sales performance through an exploratory factor analysis.
- To conduct a factor solution to establish the suitability of the proposed dimensions as a framework for B2B seller motivations.
- To make recommendations through the proposition of a six-dimensional framework for B2B seller motivations that can contribute to B2B theory and the B2B industry (where a B2B seller's perspective is explored).

Theories grounding the study

The study is founded on two theories: (1) the theory of individual differences on task performance (TP) and contextual performance (CP) as purported by Motowidlo, Borman and Schmit (1997), and (2) the self-determination theory (SDT). Task performance refers to an employee's ability to deliver on TP requirements (Yousaf, Yang & Sanders 2015), while CP encompasses actions that are not officially authorised, but positively impact the overall work environment in which the employee operates (Hameed, Khwaja & Zaman 2023). Task performance and contextual performance theory argues that employees are influenced by different factors that drive their motivations (Lado & Alonso 2017; Uraon & Gupta 2021). This implies that the unique character of employees (as individuals)

determines whether they are receptive or non-receptive to intrinsic or extrinsic stimuli that impact their motivational drive (Pradhan & Jena 2017). Therefore, the argument proposed is that individuals are different in their cognitive abilities and are impacted differently by factors (internal and external) that are inherent to their individuality (Carroll 1978).

The argument proposed by SDT is that employees who are intrinsically motivated to do their job do so based on the enjoyment they receive from their work (Vansteenkiste, Niemiec & Soenens 2010). Contrastingly, extrinsically motivated employees are guided by factors external to individual employees, such as financial rewards, the possibility of promotion, the image obtained from a position or the performance (Gagné & Deci 2005). As such, SDT purports that individual employees' cognitive choice, goal orientation, and work engagement ability are defined by enablement, which is impacted by intrinsic and extrinsic factors related to the individuals or the environment in which they operate (Rigby & Ryan 2018; Ryan & Deci 2014). Against this background, this study proposes a six-dimensional framework of B2B sellers' motivations in sales performance.

Conceptual framework

The proposed conceptual framework for the study is depicted in Figure 1 and is founded on the different intrinsic and extrinsic motivational dimensions of sales performance. These motivational dimensions of sales performance are applied within a B2B seller's context. The proposed six-dimensional framework is based on the research works of Churchill et al. (1985) and Verbeke et al. (2011), who suggested six motivational dimensions of sales performance. The emphasis of this study is on three broad motivational categories and their six dimensions, which require attention regarding the management of sales performance in a B2B context. Furthermore, a deeper understanding of the selected motivational dimensions can assist sales managers to secure the improved management of B2B sellers in terms of their overall sales performance. By developing enhanced knowledge of the six intrinsic and extrinsic dimensions of motivation through a deeper understanding of these indicators (i.e. spending time on planning, salesperson intrinsic motivations, performance goal orientation, salesperson output productivity, enthusiasm, and job involvement), sales management will be enabled to secure a positive influence on B2B sellers' sales performance.

This study aims to test a six-dimensional framework of B2B sellers' motivations in sales performance (refer to Figure 1). As such, the framework proposed is founded on the meta-

analysis of Churchill et al. (1985) and Verbeke et al. (2011). Consequently, this study contributes to sales management theory by proposing a framework of motivational dimensions that stimulates the total sales and cost-effectiveness of B2B sellers.

Figure 1 postulates that the development of comprehensive knowledge of the three motivational categories of sales performance and their suggested subdimensions can enable sales management to stimulate B2B sales performance successfully.

Motivational categories of sales performance

Through an in-depth meta-analysis (refer to Table 1), different motivational categories of sales performance are identified and discussed in detail below.

Cognitive choice

According to Cornish and Clarke (2017), cognitive choice is a rational process when making a decision. In the context of sales, it is founded on processes guided by reasoning, influencing behavioural actions. Cognitive choice is made within the parameters of psychology and impacts salespeople's decision-making in the long term (Barrick, Stewart & Piotrowski 2002; eds. Spiro, Bruce & Brewer 2017; Xu et al. 2022). Scholars, such as Alnakhli et al. (2020) and Singh, Singh and Shukla (2022), argue that the cognitive behaviour of salespeople includes aspects such as the planning of a sales call, developing strategies when approaching or engaging with a new or existing customer, and the intrinsic motivation of a salesperson (Weitz, Sujana & Sujana 1986). Within a B2B context, cognitive choice is critical to recruit new or manage existing B2B customers (Limbu et al. 2016). It enables the seller to develop a planned approach towards the management of B2B customers, founded on a deeper understanding of their needs and expectations in the relationship-building process (Alnakhli et al. 2020).

Therefore, sales management needs to develop enhanced knowledge of what cognitive choice entails in a sales context. This will guide sales managers to assist salespeople in their sales planning ability and to develop an improved understanding of the intrinsic motivational elements that will stimulate a salesperson to perform better (Shannahan et al. 2015; Spiro & Weitz 1990). A deeper understanding of these aspects means sellers can improve their sales performance ability through increased productive sales personnel (Bande et al. 2016). Verbeke et al. (2011) categorised

Cognitive choice		Goal orientation		Work engagement	
(1) Spending time on planning	(2) Salesperson's intrinsic motivations	(3) Performance goal orientation	(4) Salesperson's output productivity	(5) Enthusiasm	(6) Job involvement

FIGURE 1: Business-to-business sellers' motivations in sales performance – Six-dimensional framework.

cognitive choice as rational, verbal, and quantitative in nature. Thus, salespeople who are able to rationally plan sales activities can manage B2B customers more professionally, can address changing customer needs more successfully, and possess more enhanced knowledge of the usability and added value of the products they sell. Furthermore, such salespeople illustrate a greater ability to deliver on customers' service expectations, engage with customers through meaningful communication, and achieve sales targets and objectives (Shin et al. 2021). This is especially relevant when the intrinsic needs of salespeople are satisfied, which can stimulate future performance over a longer term (Good, Hughes & LaBrecque 2021). Consequently, increasing the cognitive choice ability of salespeople within a sales team setting can improve sellers' ability to increase their overall sales performance (Kalra et al. 2021).

Goal orientation

Goal orientation refers to the mental framework that individual salespeople use to understand and benchmark their achievements against in a sales-driven environment (VandeWalle et al. 1999). This has been validated extensively in sales literature as a key element in sales performance. Scholars, such as Kalra et al. (2021), have confirmed that salespeople's goal orientation provides them with direction and focus in their sales endeavours. However, Agnihotri et al. (2017) affirmed that salespeople's goal orientation is influenced by situational factors, which influence the desired state and achievement ability of sales individuals. Furthermore, goal orientation is confirmed as an important part of the intrinsic motivation of an individual (Itani et al. 2017). Rodríguez et al. (2022a) stated that goal orientation develops a psychological structure that people can use to benchmark their achievements against. Such benchmarks are especially applied when challenging tasks, such as the achievement of a sales quota, are to be secured (Dugan et al. 2019). In this study, goal setting is framed within the context of performance goal orientation and salesperson's outcome productivity (Dwyer, Hill & Martin 2000; VandeWalle et al. 2000). Performance goal orientation encompasses a salesperson's comparison of potential ability to actual delivery, while a salesperson's outcome productivity relates to actual sales made within a given context of time (Hong et al. 2023; VandeWalle, Nerstad & Dysvik 2018).

Sellers' ability to position their capability within a goal-orientated framework provides mental guidance towards achievement (Chai, Zhao & Babin 2012; Zoltners, Sinha & Lorimer 2022). If sellers achieve positive outcomes towards set goals, they are positively stimulated towards future performance (Good et al. 2022b). Conversely, if sales goals are not attained, it can result in a negative mental state that can hamper future sales outcome productivity (Hancock et al. 2022). Therefore, sales management needs to be supportive and understanding towards the sales-focused goals allocated to sales personnel (Anaza, Inyang & Saavedra 2018). Moreover, the setting of sales goals needs to be an inclusive process of cooperative decision-making,

reflective of a teamwork approach towards goal-setting strategies (Calixto & Ferreira 2020). Therefore, to succeed in a competitive B2B environment, the seller needs to develop a clear understanding of salespeople's goal orientation setting and sales productivity ability (Hartmann & Lussier 2020).

Sales research confirms the importance for sellers to develop an enhanced awareness of the need for salespeople to set realistic goals, especially considering that goal setting can influence future sales performance outcome in numerous ways (positive or negative) (Chawla et al. 2020). Hence, if sellers are able to strengthen their goal-setting ability through training and development, they will be in a better position to increase their overall sales performance ability. Consequently, sellers need to strengthen the stimulation of intrinsic motivation ability to improve individual sales performance (Aydin et al. 2017). If sellers are able to secure direction towards goal orientation development, modify sales strategies to encompass a deeper understanding of customer needs, empower salespeople to generate sales from current customers, and create the opportunity for salespeople to earn high sales commissions, sales performance can be strengthened (Agnihotri et al. 2017; Itani et al. 2017; Perry, Pearce & Sims 1999). A successful seller in a B2B environment that focuses on these aspects in their sales strategy will stimulate sales performance through focused effort and increased productivity (Gao, Murphy & Anderson 2020). Moreover, it will empower the seller with an increased ability to make a sale through planned and procedural effort that will develop a sales orientation approach characterised by a win-win approach for both the seller and the buyer (Good & Schwegker 2022; Rangarajan et al. 2022).

Work engagement

The importance of work engagement as a stimulant to productive output has been widely acknowledged in management literature (Edmondson & Matthews 2022; Meintjes & Hofmeyr 2018; Zablah et al. 2012). Schaufeli et al. (2002:74) defined work engagement as 'positive, fulfilling, work-related state of mind that is characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption'. Work engagement encompasses aspects, including enthusiasm and job involvement (Buchanan 1974; Schaufeli et al. 2002), where employees' eagerness to perform a specific task is influenced by multiple factors that are internal and external to the organisation (Hamzah et al. 2022). In addition, the level of job involvement that employees experience guides their attitude towards their job, ultimately influencing their future productivity output delivered (Chong et al. 2021). Therefore, in a sales context, sales management needs to understand the importance of an inclusive approach towards employee management through development, and thereby stimulate feelings of belonging and association to the job (Ferro-Soto et al. 2023; Pfajfar et al. 2022).

In a B2B context, work engagement is of high importance to secure enhanced sales performance (Koponen, Julkunen &

Asai 2019). Especially since seller performance is influenced by factors such as participation, engagement, belonging, and attachment (Chinelato, Gonçalves Filho & Nizza Júnior 2022). Consequently, organisations should develop a culture of inclusivity in their work approach, where salespeople's contribution and added value are acknowledged and respected (Ahmad et al. 2021). Literature indicates that work engagement is built on two key aspects: the willingness to perform a specific task and the employees' level of participation in their job (Adisa, Ogbonnaya & Adekoya 2021). As a result, salespeople who feel vigorous in their work and portray warm feelings towards their organisation as a place to work will illustrate a greater intent to deliver on customer expectations in their job performance (Sánchez-Cardona, Vera & Marrero-Centeno 2021). Furthermore, such individuals will portray higher levels of innovation in their sales approach towards customers, be more sensitive towards the product and service needs of customers, and be more willing to deliver on such needs through an increased customer-centric sales approach (Agnihotri, Yang & Briggs 2019; O'Cass & Sok 2013). As such, delivering on the work engagement expectations of salespeople can stimulate their overall sales productivity and performance in the long term (Høgevd et al. 2022; Rustholllkarhu et al. 2021).

Methodology

The study was quantitative and exploratory-descriptive in nature. It was built on the outcomes reported in the meta-analyses on sales performance by Churchill et al. (1985) and Verbeke et al. (2011). Dimensions from both meta-analyses underpinned this study's six-dimensional framework in the context of sales performance. In addition, the dimensions of B2B sellers' motivations in sales performance and the related questionnaire items were borrowed and modified from previous studies in an iterative process. The study's population encompassed 315 carefully selected Norwegian companies. These companies were also representative of a range of companies from different industries and corporate sizes in the product-orientated business sector of Norway (i.e., services-orientated companies were not included). The companies were selected based on the Standard Industrial Classification (SIC 2007). To achieve the aim of the study – namely to test a six-dimensional framework of B2B sellers' motivations in sales performance – key informants (hereafter referred to as respondents – i.e., sellers, team leaders, sales managers, key account managers, and regional managers) who were interested in partaking in the study were purposefully contacted through LinkedIn. A non-probability purposive sampling technique informed the selection of the sample. A Qualtrics link to the questionnaire as well as an introductory letter (that was inclusive of information on the research team, such as their contact details) were provided to respondents. In addition, two screening questions were included at the end of the questionnaire concerning the respondents' (1) total years of sales experience and (2) total years of sales experience in the current company. These questions served the purpose of verifying the competence of the participating sales executives. This is in line with research

by Campbell (1955), who suggested that the experience and competence of a study's participants are enough to fill in the questionnaire in relation to the subject matter. Furthermore, the items used for the different constructs in the study were obtained from original sources for each multi-item measure of B2B sellers' motivations as follows: cognitive choice (spending time on planning [Shannahan et al. 2015]; salesperson's intrinsic motivation [Spiro & Weitz 1990]), goal orientation (performance goal orientation [VandeWalle et al. 2000]; salesperson's outcome productivity [Dwyer et al. 2000]), and work engagement (enthusiasm [Schaufeli et al. 2002]; job involvement [Buchanan 1974]).

A five-point Likert-type scale was used across the items of all dimensions, with the anchor points of 5 ('strongly agree') and 1 ('strongly disagree'). These items are indicated in Table 2.

The key conditions that were set to secure that the right respondents participated in the study were that: (1) they had to be a salesperson with a budget responsibility and measured against this budget, and (2) their main responsibility consisted of being actively involved in selling, not managing others to sell. Email reminders were sent or telephone calls were made to inspire respondents to complete the questionnaire within a period of 7 days after the first request had been sent to them. Of the 315 questionnaires sent out, 236 responses were received, securing a response rate of 74.9%.

After editing and cleaning, the data were inserted into Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) 25.0. Using SPSS 25.0, descriptive statistics were determined to obtain information on the industry sample of respondents. Moreover, univariate and multivariate statistical techniques were applied to examine the data gathered in this study from

TABLE 2: Multi-item measures of motivation dimensions.

Constructs	Items
Cognitive choice – Spending time on planning	(a) I plan each sales call. (b) I plan sales strategies for each customer. (c) I plan how to cover my assigned territory.
Cognitive choice – Salesperson's intrinsic motivation	(a) I find trying to sell to new customers fun. (b) I find getting new customers stimulating. (c) I feel pretty good when I make a sale.
Goal orientation – Performance goal orientation	(a) It is important that others know I am a good seller. (b) It is important for me to prove I am better than others in the sales department. (c) I like to prove my ability to others.
Goal orientation – Salesperson's outcome productivity	(a) I generate sales from current customers. (b) I achieve high sales. (c) I earn high sales commissions.
Work engagement – Enthusiasm	(a) I feel vigorous in my work. (b) I am enthusiastic about my work. (c) I get carried away by my work.
Work engagement – Job involvement	(a) I have warm feelings towards this organisation as a place to work. (b) I feel a sense of pride in working for this organisation. (c) I feel as if this organisation's problems are my problems.

TABLE 3: Nature of sample sales executives' industries.

Nature of business	Count	Full-time employee equivalent	Count	Annual turnover (million Euro)	Count
Mining and quarrying	5	1–19	0	0–4.9	0
Manufacturing	115	20–99	26	5–49.9	39
Electricity	1	100–249	116	50–99.9	106
Water supply	10	250–999	78	100–249	41
Construction	5	1000+	16	250+	50
Total	236	Total	236	Total	236

TABLE 4: Dimensions of motivation in sales performance – Univariate statistics.

Dimension	Item	N	Mean	Standard deviation
Cognitive choice – Spending time on planning	(a)	235	3.49	1.03
	(b)	234	3.79	0.90
	(c)	234	4.17	0.70
Cognitive choice – Salesperson's intrinsic motivation	(a)	234	4.64	0.62
	(b)	234	4.74	0.50
	(c)	232	4.86	0.40
Goal orientation – Performance goal orientation	(a)	234	3.48	1.09
	(b)	234	2.44	1.18
	(c)	233	2.66	1.20
Goal orientation – Salesperson's outcome productivity	(a)	233	4.42	0.64
	(b)	233	3.83	0.82
	(c)	233	3.75	0.88
Work engagement – Enthusiasm	(a)	234	4.25	0.78
	(b)	234	4.40	0.75
	(c)	234	4.26	0.78
Work engagement – Job involvement	(a)	229	4.00	0.88
	(b)	230	4.40	0.79
	(c)	230	3.74	0.96

the 18-item questionnaire. The results are presented and discussed in the following section.

Empirical findings

Sample characteristics

The study's sample included 236 respondents, representative of different B2B product industries in Norway. These industries were predominantly from sectors including manufacturing, electricity, water supply, and construction, and were representative of a full-time employee equivalent of 20–1000+ employees and an annual turnover value of 0–250+ million euros (refer to Table 3).

Table 4 displays the univariate statistics. Each dimension of B2B sellers' motivations indicates only very minor internal non-response bias. Table 4 also shows the mean values and standard deviations for each dimension of B2B sellers' motivations and related items, indicating coherent high-quality responses from the key respondents.

Factor analysis

To test the six-dimensional framework of B2B sellers' motivations in the context of sales performance, we ran an exploratory factor analysis (Norusis 1993, 1994). The factor analysis consisted of 18 items (three items per dimension), as previously displayed in Table 2. Consequently, no items

displayed in Table 2 were excluded. The principal component method was used to test the relevance of the dimensions in the factor solution. An orthogonal approach (varimax rotation) was used to rotate the factor solution.

Testing for common method bias

The study applied different measures to lower the occurrence of response bias and tested for method bias. Scholars, such as MacKenzie and Podsakoff (2012), inform that there are multiple reasons why method bias can be present in social sciences research. Response bias is inherent to causes such as ability, motivational, and task issues. These causes can be managed by including procedural and statistical aspects in the research process. A large amount of time and effort was secured to comply with the required procedural issues through a focus on knowledgeable salespeople in each company whom we judged to be professionally interested in the research topic. We also considered the questionnaire design to reduce the time and energy it would take respondents to complete. Moreover, the statistical consideration of method bias was applied to the study through the Harman single-factor test. The number of factors was set to one based on six factors and 18 items. The test indicated that the factor solution accounted for 26.1% of variance. As a result, common method bias appears not to be a concern of relevance in this study.

Factor solution

The results of the factor solution (see Table 5) were satisfactory (Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin/overall measure of sampling adequacy [MSA] = 0.751; Bartlett's test: prox. chi-square = 1584.390; DF = 1153; significance = 0.000). Table 5 shows that the MSA spans between 0.65 and 0.88, the communalities range from 0.48 to 0.83 with a total explained variance of 70%, and the Cronbach's alphas for the six factors are 0.68–0.83. The results in Table 5 indicate that all six factors in the factor solution of B2B sellers' motivations in sales performance display satisfactory convergent, discriminant and nomological validity, and reliability of each subdimension.

Research implications

The results of this study are satisfactory, demonstrating that the dimensions of B2B sellers' motivations, which originate from the meta-analyses by Churchill et al. (1985) and Verbeke et al. (2011), are relevant in a B2B sales setting. The dimensions of B2B sellers' motivations applied in the study are relevant based on: (1) cognitive choice, that is spending time on planning (Shannahan et al. 2015) and salesperson's intrinsic motivation (Spiro & Weitz 1990), goal orientation, including performance goal orientation (VandeWalle et al. 2000) and salesperson's outcome productivity (Dwyer et al. 2000), and work engagement, namely enthusiasm (Schaufeli et al. 2002) and job involvement (Buchanan 1974).

We contend that the results in this study offer a platform for further research in the context of B2B sellers' sales performance. Further research may apply the six-dimensional framework of B2B sellers' motivation in relation to their

TABLE 5: Factor solution illustrating convergent, discriminant, and nomological validity.

Dimension and item		Factor(s)						Communality per item	MSA per item
		1	2	3	4	5	6		
Work engagement – job involvement	(a)	0.818	0.152	0.156	0.028	0.192	0.104	0.765	0.793
	(b)	0.794	-0.040	0.173	0.089	0.294	0.127	0.772	0.814
	(c)	0.689	-0.053	0.088	0.130	0.039	-0.114	0.517	0.752
Goal orientation – performance goal orientation	(c)	-0.059	0.889	0.013	-0.018	0.178	0.079	0.832	0.660
	(b)	0.048	0.863	0.004	0.011	0.114	0.065	0.765	0.694
	(a)	0.060	0.785	0.132	0.176	-0.065	0.079	0.679	0.768
Cognitive choice – salesperson's intrinsic motivation	(b)	0.222	0.052	0.856	0.113	0.087	0.099	0.814	0.730
	(a)	0.262	0.033	0.822	0.143	0.101	0.166	0.803	0.743
	(c)	0.012	0.066	0.708	-0.039	0.180	0.027	0.541	0.864
Cognitive choice – spending time on planning	(b)	0.158	0.054	-0.004	0.852	0.086	0.087	0.769	0.667
	(a)	0.159	0.104	-0.029	0.848	0.102	0.036	0.767	0.654
	(c)	-0.075	0.004	0.325	0.589	0.085	0.131	0.483	0.852
Work engagement – enthusiasm	(a)	-0.030	0.120	0.205	0.186	0.797	0.131	0.745	0.777
	(b)	0.429	0.027	0.130	0.050	0.748	0.064	0.768	0.826
	(c)	0.383	0.124	0.113	0.082	0.702	-0.003	0.674	0.876
Goal orientation – salesperson's outcome productivity	(b)	0.094	0.137	0.021	0.079	0.041	0.811	0.694	0.645
	(c)	-0.065	0.124	0.026	0.023	0.053	0.795	0.656	0.652
	(a)	0.042	-0.052	0.224	0.123	0.063	0.688	0.547	0.701
Total explained variance per factor (%)	-	12.8	12.6	12.3	10.8	10.8	10.6	-	-
Cumulative explained total variance (%)	-	12.8	25.4	37.7	48.6	59.4	70.0	-	-
Cronbach's alpha	-	0.74	0.83	0.79	0.71	0.77	0.68	-	-

MSA, measure of sampling adequacy.

objective and subjective performance. Moreover, the results of the six-dimensional framework could consider dimensions of motivation in relation to B2B sellers' economic and non-economic satisfaction. Another research opportunity is to examine the association and relationships of the structural properties of the B2B sellers' motivation dimensions with the other sales performance indicators (i.e., sellers' skill level, role perception, and aptitude as well as the influence of organisational and environmental indicators on B2B sellers) presented in the meta-analyses by Churchill et al. (1985), Verbeke et al. (2011), and Walker et al. (1977).

Discussion

Sales force motivation has been widely confirmed in B2B literature as a critical element in driving individual salespeople's ability. An in-depth understanding of the intrinsic and extrinsic factors that stimulate salesperson motivation is imperative for B2B sellers, strengthening their competitive advantage in a highly competitive market environment (Good et al. 2022a). Although motivation is an individualistic trait, the proposed six-dimensional framework provides a guide to the need to focus on cognitive choice, goal orientation, and work engagement as key drivers of salesperson motivation in a B2B context. This conformation has been validated recently by scholars, such as Itani, Chonko and Agnihotri (2022a) and Koponen et al. (2019). They have confirmed the need to develop a deeper understanding of cognitive choice as a precursor to salesperson motivation as promulgated by this study. These scholars further argued that an individual salesperson's ability to plan a sale strategy and the overall outcome of such implementation influence the overall level of motivation of the individual salesperson. Consequently, sales planning is a crucial part of a salesperson's

success, which influences the intrinsic motivation level of the seller. Furthermore, by planning according to sales needs, the salesperson is better prepared for the seller-buyer engagement, which could positively influence the cognitive state of the seller prior to and post engagement. As such, sales management (through engaging leadership) needs to become increasingly aware of this in their leadership style towards salespeople in a B2B context.

A new school of thought has also been developed that confirms the need for wider exploration of the influence of goal orientation on the motivational level of an individual salesperson (Yaghtin, Safarzadeh & Zand 2020; Zheng et al. 2023). As purported by the proposed framework in this study, sales managers need to become more aware of salespeople's psychological needs, where aspects like acceptance of being, provision of positive inspiration through communication, and acknowledgement of performance become key influencers of motivation. This outcome is confirmed by scholars (e.g. Sleep et al. 2020) who argue that goal setting by a salesperson needs to be a collaborative venture between employer and employee through the mediating role of transformational sales leadership. As such, a transformational leadership agenda could develop goals with salespeople that align with their individualistic needs, available capabilities and skills as well as overall strategic objectives of B2B sellers. Through such an approach, salespeople's individual motivation is positively influenced, leading to enhanced productivity in the long term (Gao et al. 2020; Hooi & Chan 2022).

In addition, work engagement has been proposed as an important element in the development of a positive motivational mindset by salespeople. The study confirmed the

importance of enthusiasm and job involvement as key elements of work engagement that should be considered when influencing salespeople's motivational level in a B2B context. This finding aligns with findings by a United States study, establishing that through mutually inclusive goal setting, salespeople feel more inclined to perform better, since they feel acknowledged and valued in the performance management process (Inyang, Agnihotri & Munoz 2018). Through a deeper understanding of the ability and emotional needs of a salesperson, sales management can become more aware of an individual salesperson's potential to deliver performance expectations. Moreover, through such an approach, sales management acknowledges awareness of a salesperson's performance ability, which could positively stimulate individual motivational levels (Good & Schwepker 2022).

Job involvement was also proposed as a key element of work engagement that could impact salespeople's overall motivational level. A B2B seller's ability to develop strategies that could enhance a one-on-one engagement with employees will drive salespeople's feelings of belonging and pride towards the B2B seller brand. The creation of platforms where salespeople can share their voice and interact with management through collaborative decision-making that also influences their individual work engagement ability results in the development of warm feelings towards this organisation as a place to work. Furthermore, this will develop a sense of pride in salespeople concerning working for the B2B seller, which strengthens overall levels of motivation. This finding is supported by Kumar et al. (2018), who stated that work engagement is an important driving force for employee motivation. The authors argued that employee motivation is strengthened by creating a work environment that is supportive of employees' needs and challenges, developmental towards employees' in-house skill and emotional needs, and understanding of employee work-life balance needs.

Theoretical and managerial implications

The study's results offer an increased understanding on how to structure B2B sellers' motivations in a six-dimensional framework, including cognitive choice (i.e. spending time on planning and salesperson's intrinsic motivation), goal orientation (i.e. performance goal orientation and salesperson's outcome productivity), and work engagement (i.e. enthusiasm and job involvement). Through a deeper understanding of this proposed framework, B2B sellers will be more successfully enabled to understand and deliver on the motivational needs of B2B salespeople.

Theoretical implications

Greater understanding of the importance of cognitive choice as a motivational driver

The study's findings confirm the importance of cognitive choice as a factor that influences individual salespeople's motivation. Knowledge of the relevance of cognitive choice in the context of salesperson motivation in a B2B seller

context is critical, since it has implications for B2B theory. A salesperson's ability to plan daily, weekly or monthly sales activities appears to be interlinked with the intrinsic motivation level of the individual salesperson. It is also probable that if salespeople improve their ability to plan and execute such plans in a structured and systematic manner, their self-esteem is enhanced, which impacts their level of productivity (Rangarajan et al. 2022). When salespeople can plan each of the sales calls to be made, can plan sales strategies for each customer in a timely and consistent manner, and are able to plan how to cover an assigned territory, they feel more enabled to be successful in reaching their sales targets through a structured and focused approach. Such self-awareness of possibility enhances individual salespeople's motivation to perform better (Dugan et al. 2019). Cognitive choice has been researched in multiple contexts that confirm the need for understanding employee individuality (Madhavaram & Hunt 2017; Ribhan & Myadiantoro 2021). However, the current results expand on the importance of cognitive choice by specifying its relevance and context to a proposed motivational framework in a B2B context.

Improved understanding of goal orientation and its relevance as a motivational driver

The research endorses the critical value add of goal orientation as a motivational driver. Aligned with research by Lin (2017) and Yaghtin et al. (2020), this study endorses the important role played by goal orientation in driving future motivational intention. Through participative leadership characterised by open communication, employee acknowledgement, employee participation enablement, and development of a supportive working environment, employees like salespeople can be empowered to participate in goal setting. Such participation can positively stimulate individual salespeople's ability and performance, ultimately strengthening the overall sales performance outcome of B2B sellers. Therefore, it seems necessary for B2B sellers to be cognisant of salespeople's work-related and emotional needs when setting B2B goals or individual performance goals. Through the development of an in-depth understanding of the dualistic needs of employees (in the workplace and as individuals with a personal life), an enhanced work-life balance plan can be developed for individual salespeople, securing a positive impact on the future motivation and performance productivity of the individuals (Inyang et al. 2018; Pantouvakis & Patsiouras 2016). Considering this, the study proposes the inclusion of goal setting as a viable driver of individual motivation in a B2B context.

A perspective on work engagement and its relevance to the development of individual motivation

The findings of the study validate the relevance of work engagement in strengthening the motivational level of individual employees (e.g. salespeople) in a B2B context. As such, it seems that the stimulation of employee enthusiasm and the active participation of such employees in their job are imperative to the enhancement of individual motivation levels (Afsar, Masood & Umrani 2019; Ruiz-Palomino & Zoghbi-Manrique-de-Lara 2020). Work engagement is enhanced using

teamwork, transformational leadership, personality-job alignment assessments, and employee acknowledgement in the workplace (Mahdikhani & Yazdani 2020; Van der Berg, Foege & Nüesch 2022). Work engagement can be strengthened and overall work morale enhanced through a stronger focus on the branding of the organisational values of the B2B seller, and the development and implementation of a participative work culture that embraces employee diversity as well as supports a healthy work-life balance. In addition, published research studies confirm that the more employees feel vigorous in their work, the greater their intent to develop warm feelings towards their organisation as a place to work and a sense of pride in working for it. The research results confirm this, promulgating for the inclusion of work engagement into a framework that could drive the motivational intention of individual employees, such as salespeople. Nevertheless, such a framework should consider that the fundamental drivers for salespeople to be motivated may vary between individual employees, necessitating the further expansion of the proposed framework through future studies.

Managerial implications

From a managerial perspective, it is evident that B2B sellers should consider a motivational framework to enhance salesperson performance that is founded on the principles of cognitive choice, goal setting, and work engagement. In addition, sales management needs to be understanding of salespeople's individuality and that the management approach to motivate these employees will differ based on individual salespeople's expectations and circumstances. This is especially significant since motivation is the third most important factor influencing sales performance (Churchill et al. 1985; Itani, Kalra & Riley 2022b). It remains crucial for B2B sellers to secure the consistent motivation of their salespeople through a structured approach that encompasses an understanding of both the intrinsic and extrinsic motivational needs of their salespeople (Good et al. 2022b; Miao, Evans & Shaoming 2007). As such, a specific focus by sales management of B2B sellers is required on aspects that guide leadership towards a deeper understanding of the cognitive choice behaviour of salespersons. For example, sales leadership should become inclusive in their approach towards the goal-setting expectations of salespeople, where goal setting is secured with the salespeople and not for the salespeople. Through a structured and engaging approach that is formative and educational in nature, line managers can become interactive in the performance management of their sales staff by assisting with goal setting, goal management, and goal achievement. Leadership guidance can secure interactive engagement, guiding salespeople towards sales strategy planning, implementation, and monitoring. The development of such a transformational management approach that focuses on leadership through participation may stimulate salespeople's motivational level, enhancing overall contentment and interest in the job performed.

In terms of goal setting, it is important for sales management to understand the career aspirations of new recruits and

existing salespeople. For example, through an in-depth analysis of the individual aspirations of salespeople, sales management is better enabled to develop knowledge of the ability and existing skills of its employee base. This can enable line managers to identify salespeople's strengths and weaknesses faster and provide leadership to address any shortcomings through training and development. Furthermore, management can be better prepared to assess the extent to which the salesperson can reach set goals through regular engagement sessions on the sales performance of individual salespeople. This analysis can develop a proposed road map to guide salespeople on managing their own performance goal setting with greater success. Through collaborative goal setting and performance management, salespeople are enabled to develop more realistic sales goals that are inclusive of their skills, ability and weaknesses. In the case of the latter, training programmes, motivational seminars, collaborative sales partnerships with more experienced salespeople, and the inclusion of technology (e.g. Salesforce) to assist salespeople in customer management can help to address shortfalls in their performance.

Finally, B2B sellers should develop in-depth knowledge of how work engagement impacts salespeople's personal motivation. Sales leadership needs to develop an enhanced understanding that engaged salespeople (in terms of team participation, manager-employee interaction and work focus) improve individual motivation levels. The development of an organisational culture characterised by acknowledging employee individuality stimulates engagement in the workplace through open communication and team-orientated work performance, and manages employees (e.g. salespeople) through a participative leadership approach, meaning B2B sellers can enhance the overall motivational level of salespeople over the medium to long term. Furthermore, B2B sellers need to become increasingly understanding of the value add of transformational leadership in strengthening employee participation, motivation, and performance. This is important because employees who are engaged in the workplace illustrate a passion for their job, since they have a vested interest in the overall success of the business brand they work for. The creation of a working environment that stimulates employee engagement in the workplace enhances salespeople's intrinsic motivational level. As such, B2B sellers need to focus on the following aspects to stimulate salespeople's engagement in the workplace: stimulating their motivational level in a positive manner, namely acknowledging salespeople's performance through in-house platforms (e.g. peer assessments, gift cards as acknowledgement of positive performance outcomes, or social team-building activities that could stimulate participation in a supportive environment) or social media platforms where employees are given recognition as employee of the week or month through the B2B seller's LinkedIn or Facebook pages. Furthermore, employees can receive training on how to address their fears, be allowed to have flexible sales performance targets developed with sales management and not for sales management, and acknowledge individual sales

activities rather than overall sales performance. Through such an approach, B2B sellers can be better enabled to influence the motivational level of salespersons with increased success.

Conclusion and suggestions for further studies

This study assessed B2B sellers' motivations in the context of sales performance as well as their intrinsic and extrinsic motivations. The research offers an increased understanding on how to structure B2B sellers' motivations in a six-dimensional framework, including cognitive choice (i.e. spending time on planning and a salesperson's intrinsic motivation), goal orientation (i.e. performance goal orientation and salesperson's outcome productivity), and work engagement (i.e. enthusiasm and job involvement).

The six-dimensional framework of B2B sellers' motivations demonstrates validity and reliability in the context of sales performance. However, further studies are necessary to test the framework's validity and reliability across B2B settings. The framework may also be verified in other B2B settings and countries. It would be valuable to test the six-dimensional framework beyond the European business setting, for instance in North America, South America, Asia, and Africa.

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Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

Authors' contributions

R.R., M.R-L., N.H., and G.S. contributed equally to this article.

Ethical considerations

The study was conducted in Spain, which does not require ethical clearance for academic studies that includes human participants. As a result, there is no ethical clearance document to provide.

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Data availability

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, M.R-L., upon reasonable request.

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