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The Role of Sales Beliefs in Facilitating Experiential Learning: An Empirical Study of Japanese Salespeople

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ABSTRACT

The purposes of this research were to examine developmental experience at different career stages and to clarify the role of sales beliefs in promoting experiential learning of salespeople. By applying the theoretical framework of expertise research and cognitive psychology, data from Japanese real estate salespeople were analyzed. Results suggest that (1) experiential learning is activated in the later stage (from 6 to 10 years) of a career, and (2) salespeople who balance customer and goal achievement orientations learn from others in the early stage (from 1 to 5 years) of their careers. A discussion of the theoretical and managerial implications is presented.

According to previous surveys, over 70% of individual learning can be explained by work experience (McCall, Lombardo, & Morrison, 1988; Morrison & Brantner, 1992; Morrison & Hoch, 1986). This indicates the importance of exploring the experiential learning process in a management context. Prior research on sales management has also examined the direct and moderating effect of job experience on salespeople's performance (e.g., Dong-Gil & Dennis, 2005; O'Hara, Boles, & Johnston, 1991; Matsuo & Kusumi, 2002), although sales experience was measured as the salesperson's length of time in the current job in these studies.

There are three viewpoints in examining experiential learning research: (1) length of experience (McDaniel, Schmidt, & Hunter, 1988; Schmidt, Hunter, & Outerbridge, 1986); (2) the characteristics of developmental experience (Davies & Easterby-Smith, 1984; McCall, 1988, 1998; McCall, Lombardo, & Morrison, 1988; McCall & Hollenbeck, 2002; McCauley et al., 1994); and (3) individual ability to learn from experience (Ashford, 1986; Brutus et al., 2000; Spreitzer, McCall, & Mahoney, 1997). Of the three viewpoints, the present research focuses on the characteristics of experience and the ability to learn from experience, which have been less examined in sales management literature.

The purposes of this study are to explore the experiential learning process during the first 10 years of a salesperson's career, and to examine the effect of work-related beliefs on experiential learning, using data on Japanese real estate salespeople. To extend the understanding of the learning process of salespeople, this study applies the theories on experiential learning, expertise, and cognitive psychology into the research model.

The article is organized as follows. First, the literature on experiential learning, metacognitive knowledge, and expertise is reviewed. Next, a research question and hypothesis are proposed based on the literature review. Then, the research method involving the survey of real estate salespeople is presented. Finally, results are presented and discussed from theoretical and practical viewpoints.

THEORETICAL FOUNDATION

Experiential Learning

Experience can be defined as an individual's interaction with his/her external environment (Dewey, 1938). Based on a diverse set of theoretical traditions, including the work of John Dewey, Kurt Lewin, and Jean Piaget, Kolb (1984) proposed a four-stage cyclical model: (1) concrete experience, (2) reflective observation, (3) abstract conceptualization, and (4) active experimentation. This suggests that immediate personal experience is the basis for observation and reflection, and these are assimilated into abstract hypotheses or concepts. Next, these hypotheses or concepts guide learners to create new experiences. Kolb's model has been one of the most influential models in management learning, and has received a good deal of empirical support (Kayes, 2002; Mainemelis, Boyatzis, & Kolb, 2002; Meyer, 2003; Vince, 1998).

Kolb (1984) defines learning as the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience. This definition rests on six assumptions: Learning is a process, not an outcome; derives from experience; requires an individual to resolve

dialectically opposed demands; is holistic and integrative; requires interplay between a person and his/her environment; and results in knowledge creation (Kayes, 2002; Kolb, 1984). Dixon (1999) argues that learning is about interpreting what we experience in the world, and that we each create our own unique interpretations, which mediate our actions.

Kolb's (1984) model suggests that it is necessary to examine not only the characteristics of objective experience but also an individual's ability to learn from the experience. However, past empirical studies have mainly focused on the features of developmental work experience that facilitates a manager's capabilities and performance. In addition, research on how individuals learn from experience in their career has been scarce.

Developmental Work Experiences

Prior empirical studies have focused on the "concrete experience" stage in Kolb's (1984) learning model, investigating the features of work experiences that promote a manager's development. Davies and Easterby-Smith (1984) asked 60 managers in five different companies how they considered they had developed in the past. They found that managers develop their abilities when they are confronted with novelty that forces them to accept major changes in their perspectives, when they take tough decisions and implement them with probity, and when they had initiated their developmental moves themselves.

McCall and colleagues (McCall, 1998; McCall, Lombardo, & Morrison, 1988) also studied successful executives, and found that specific experiences have the most developmental potential, which fall into four categories: (1) job assignments (early work experiences, first supervision, starting from scratch, turnarounds, project/task force, managing a larger scope, and line to staff switch); (2) other people (bosses and role models); (3) hardships (business mistakes, career setback, subordinate performance problems, changing jobs, and personal trauma); and (4) other (coursework and purely personal).

Reviewing previous studies on developmental experience, McCauley et al. (1994) classified them into three categories: job transitions, task-related characteristics (creating change, high level of responsibility, and nonauthority relationships), and obstacles. Based on this framework, they developed the Developmental Challenge Profile (DCP) scales, consisting of 15 dimensions, and found that job transitions most clearly provide managers the opportunity to try new behaviors and to be exposed to new ways of thinking.

Ability to Learn from Experience

Although there seems to be a consensus among researchers that managers learn through challenging job experiences that forces them to explore new things (Davies & Easterby-Smith, 1984; McCall, 1998; McCauley et al., 1994), developmental experiences do not guarantee success (McCall, 1998). Because not all people learn equally from the same kinds of experience, there should be individual differences in ability to learn from experience. However, research on the ability to learn from experience is limited. Prior research on the ability to learn from experience has studied the role of attitude (Spreitzer, McCall, & Mahoney, 1997) and self-esteem (Brutus et al., 2000).

In order to identify international executive potential, Spreitzer, McCall, and Mahoney (1997) developed the scale of ability to learn from experience, named Prospector, which includes end-state competencies (knowledge and skills necessary for effective executive behavior) and the ability to learn from experience. The “ability to learn from experience” scale consists of six dimensions: “uses feedback,” “cross-culturally adventurous,” “seeks opportunities,” “open to criticism,” “seeks feedback,” and “flexible.” Results show that the cross-culturally adventurous, seeks opportunities, and open to criticism dimensions predict success with international issues. However, the dimensions of the ability to learn from experience scale did not have enough predictive power for executive potential beyond the end-state dimensions.

Brutus et al. (2000) focused on the role of organization-based self-esteem (OBSE) as the ability to learn from experience. OBSE refers to perceived value and worthiness that individuals place on themselves as organizational members. They found that high-OBSE managers felt they had developed regardless of the characteristics of their jobs, while low-OBSE managers felt they had developed only when they had challenging jobs. This suggests that high-OBSE managers have ability to learn not only from challenging jobs but also from nonchallenging jobs.

Metacognitive Knowledge and Work-Related Beliefs

As Kolb’s (1984) model suggested, self-reflection on concrete experiences is critical for experiential learning. In order to reflect on our own experiences, we need metacognition, or reflective capacity to engage in thinking about thinking (Jost, Kruglanski, & Nelson, 1998).

Metacognition can be classified into “metacognitive processing” and “metacognitive knowledge” (Flavell, 1976; Wellman, 1985). The former involves the skills of planning,

monitoring, and evaluating an individual's progress during task completion, while the latter includes knowledge about task, strategy, and person (Flavell, 1976). Metacognition is related to academic achievement and problem-solving performance (Keith & Frese, 2005), and it is thought to be the basis of people's decision making (Morris, 1990). Of the two aspects of metacognition, the current study focuses on metacognitive knowledge.

Pintrich (2002) defined metacognitive knowledge as knowledge about cognition in general, in addition to knowledge about one's own cognition. Based on Flavell (1979), he classified metacognitive knowledge into three types: strategic knowledge, knowledge about cognitive tasks, and self-knowledge. Strategic knowledge is knowledge of general strategies for learning, thinking, and problem solving. Knowledge about cognitive tasks is knowledge of the different conditions and tasks where the different strategies are used appropriately. Self-knowledge is knowledge of one's strengths and weaknesses as well as beliefs about one's motivation.

Since these three types of metacognitive knowledge are higher-order knowledge guiding and directing individual behaviors (Nelson & Narens, 1994), they may play important roles in reflecting on one's experiences and in drawing lessons from them. In a sales context, salespeople must have metacognitive knowledge about the nature of selling activities, selling strategies, and their own selling ability.

Previous research in educational psychology reports that metacognitive knowledge facilitates decision making, problem solving, and task performance. Carr and Jessup (1997) found that children's metacognitive knowledge of mathematics strategies is a significant predictor of strategy use. Ormond et al. (1991) reported that three types of metacognitive knowledge of decision making are significantly related to the performance of adolescents and their decision-making style. Pokya and Blumenfeld (1990) revealed that students' metacognitive strategy use affects their grades. Schoenfeld (1985) also found that students' beliefs on mathematics are related to their problem-solving process.

Since metacognitive knowledge can be represented as beliefs on task, strategy, and one's own ability, this study focuses on work-related beliefs in influencing experiential learning. Work-related beliefs are defined as beliefs about how to behave in work situations. In the theory of reasoned action (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975, 1981), a person's attitude about a behavior is a function of his or her salient beliefs about performing the behavior, including the likelihood that the behavior produces certain consequences and the person's evaluation of those consequences. Ajzen and Fishbein (1980) postulate that any persuasive attempt to change attitudes, intentions, or behaviors must be directed at

one or more of the person's individual beliefs. Beliefs that are the fundamental determinants of the variables to be changed are called salient primary beliefs (Strader & Katz, 1990). Based on the literature reviewed, work-related beliefs can be conceptualized as metacognitive knowledge about work that directs and guides employee attitudes and behaviors at work.

Although previous marketing research has investigated the impact of consumers' beliefs on their attitudes and behaviors (e.g., Collins, Steg, & Knoning, 2007; Jin, An, & Simon, 2009; Prendergast & Thompson, 2008), few studies have examined the role of sales beliefs on consumers' learning activities.

10-Year Rule and Career Stage

One of the purposes of this study is to examine experiential learning at different career stages. Although some studies have examined the relationship between length of experience and job performance (McDaniel, Schmidt, & Hunter, 1988; Schmidt, Hunter, & Outerbridge, 1986), few researchers have paid attention to how people learn from experience at different career stages. The expertise research in cognitive psychology may provide a framework for career stages of experiential learning.

In prior research on expertise, it is suggested that at least 10 years of active involvement in a specific field is necessary for an individual to reach an international level of achievement (Ericsson, 1996, 1999; Ericsson, Krampe, & Tesch-Romer, 1993; Simon & Chase, 1973). This phenomenon is called "the 10-year rule of necessary preparation" (Ericsson, 1996), which has been confirmed by historical and contemporary data in traditional domains such as chess, sports, and music. In these domains, the highest levels of observed public performance are only displayed after a minimum 10-year stage of intensive preparation.

According to Dreyfus and Dreyfus (1987), the road to becoming an expert can be divided into five stages: (1) novice, (2) advanced beginner, (3) competent, (4) proficient, and (5) expert. A novice would start from knowing nothing to being able to make a reasonable attempt at performing the skill, while an expert has a deep understanding of both situations and responses. Based on the 10-year rule and the five-step model, it may take at least 10 years to go up the five-step ladder from novice to expert in a specific domain.

It should be noted, however, that 10 years of experience does not guarantee expert performance. The amount and quality of "deliberate practice" is crucial for attaining a high level of performance (Ericsson, 1996, 1999; Ericsson & Lehmann, 1996). Deliberate practice refers to training activities that include a well-defined task with an

appropriate difficulty level for a particular individual, informative feedback, and opportunities for repetition and error correction (Ericsson, 1996).

The concept of “increasingly complex microworlds” (ICM) proposed by Burton, Brown, and Fischer (1984) is a form of deliberate practice. In this instructional framework, individuals who try to learn complex skills are exposed to a sequence of environments in which their tasks become increasingly complex. The ICM paradigm allows the learner to focus on and master one aspect of the complex skills.

In addition, sales beliefs are expected to facilitate or inhibit experiential learning because sales beliefs as metacognitive knowledge direct and guide employee attitudes and behaviors. Therefore, it is hypothesized that employees with appropriate sales beliefs could become experts more quickly than could employees with inappropriate sales beliefs.

Research Question and Hypothesis

The literature review suggests that existing research on experiential learning has focused on identifying developmental experience, but has paid little attention to the effect of career stage and ability to learn from experience. In order to investigate the effect of career stage and the role of ability to learn from experience in the experiential learning process, this study incorporates the framework of expertise research into the research model, shown in Figure 1. The purpose of this research was twofold: (1) to examine developmental experience at different career stages and (2) to clarify the role of sales beliefs in promoting experiential learning of salespeople. In identifying developmental experiences, the relationships between past work experiences and current sales performance were analyzed. It is assumed in this study that if past work experience is positively related to current performance, people will acquire some knowledge or skills from work experience.

Based on the 10-year rule in expertise research, this study focuses on the first 10 years of a salesperson’s career, which were divided into two stages: early stage (1–5 years) and later stage (6–10 years). Most people are categorized as “novice” and “advanced beginner” (Dreyfus & Dreyfus, 1987) in the early stage, and as “competent” and “proficient” in the later stage, although there need not be rigorous correspondence. In order to explore developmental experience in different career stages, the following research question is proposed.

Research Question: What kinds of work experience are related to current sales performance in the early stage and later stage of a salesperson’s career?

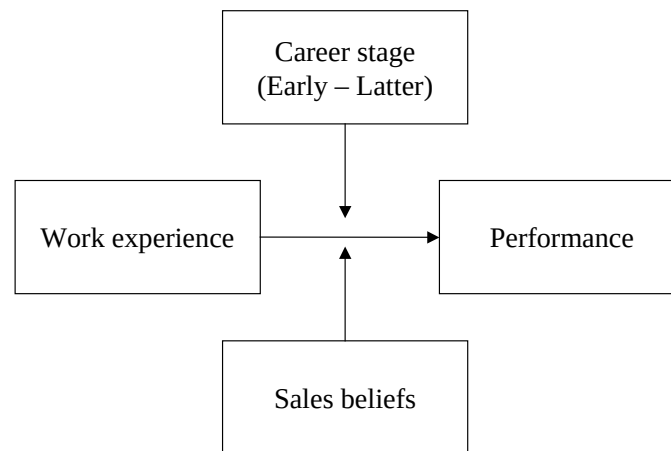


Figure 1. Research model.

Work-related beliefs, or personal theories or philosophies about how to behave in work situations, are regarded as metacognitive knowledge. For example, salespeople may have sales beliefs that guide their selling methods or skills and influence the experiential learning process. Salespeople with different sales beliefs may learn differently from work experiences because sales beliefs may function as abilities to learn from experience. Thus, the following hypothesis is proposed.

H1: Sales beliefs moderate the relationship between work experience and sales performance.

The hypothesis predicts that the relationship between work experience and sales performance differs among salespeople with different sales beliefs.

METHOD

Sample and Procedures

The subjects were salespeople at a large real estate agency that operates primarily in the Tokyo area of Japan. Two kinds of surveys were conducted of salespeople working in a department that engages in the business of mediation between buyers and sellers of real estate. Salespeople were chosen because obtaining performance data for them is relatively easy, which are required to interpret whether specific work experience contributed to enhanced knowledge and skills. Real estate selling is also appropriate for

this study because the selling style is based on individual selling, rather than team selling, which could make individual performance less clear. Additionally, as real estate customers are engaged in complex buying tasks, the salespeople have to offer alternatives to their customers, develop cooperative relationships, and obtain referrals for future business (Harris, Mowen, & Brown, 2005).

Items of work experience and sales beliefs were collected by preliminary research using an open-ended mail survey of 72 high-performing salespeople with more than 10 years of experience. They were asked to describe the work experience that seemed to have enhanced their sales skills and knowledge in the first 10 years of their careers. They were also asked to describe the beliefs or philosophies they follow in conducting sales activities. These descriptions of work experience and sales beliefs were then used to develop the quantitative questionnaire.

This study focused on salespeople with over 10 years experience because the “10-year rule” in expertise research suggests that salespeople need at least that much experience to become experts in their field.

Next, a quantitative questionnaire survey was conducted to measure the work experience and sales beliefs of 218 salespeople with more than 10 years experience in the real estate industry. Of the questionnaires, 26 were unusable because of missing data, leaving 192 cases for analysis (99.0% men, 1% women). Although participants were required to sign their names on the questionnaire to obtain their objective sales performance from headquarters after the survey, they were assured that their individual answers would be held in confidence. To maximize privacy and minimize bias, respondents completed surveys in sealed envelopes that were gathered and returned to a research company.

This study requested salespeople to recall their past experiences. In preliminary interviews with some salespeople, they appeared to be capable of recalling many of their sales experiences vividly. Additionally, past expertise research had adopted retrospective research methods (Ericsson, 1996). Thus, no major problem in terms of potential bias in the survey data should have existed.

Providing some background information on the real estate business in Japan is beneficial. No significant difference between the United States and Japan exists in terms of the basic process of buying and selling real estate, but major differences exist in the tasks of the agents or retailers. In the United States, mediating tasks such as consultation, price assessment, property investigations, and contract services are typically conducted by different specialists, whereas in Japan, real estate salespeople are responsible for all these tasks, which suggests that Japanese real estate salespeople engage in more

complex tasks compared to their counterparts in the United States.

Additionally, maintaining relationships with customers is difficult for salespeople because the agents operate mainly in the Tokyo area, where customer needs are diverse and competition is fierce among agents. In this market, salespeople are required to acquire new customers to maintain good financial performance; the salespeople have opportunities to gain sales knowledge and skills by acquiring new customers even after becoming experts.

Measures

In the quantitative questionnaire survey, 45 items of work experience and 32 items of sales beliefs extracted from the preliminary open-ended survey were presented to the respondents. Respondents were asked what kind of experience they had in the early (1–5 years) and later stages (6–10 years) of their careers as salespeople using a 7-point Likert scale (1 = not important, 7 = very important). When they had no experience, they were asked to indicate "not experienced." They were also asked what sort of beliefs or philosophies they followed in conducting sales activities using a 7-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree).

Sales performance was measured by sales volume during the previous year, information about which was obtained from company headquarters. To remove the effects of market conditions in the branch to which the salespeople belonged, the following procedures were adopted. First, salespeople were divided into two groups: urban and suburban areas, in which market characteristics are different. Second, sales volume data were standardized in each of the two groups, and these standardized data on sales performance were used in the analyses.

To classify the items of work experience and sales beliefs, the following procedures were adopted based on Churchill (1979). First, factor analyses with varimax rotation were conducted with work experience (45 items) and sales beliefs (14 items). Items of work experience were separately analyzed in the early (1–5 years) and later career stages (6–10 years). Then, items were deleted when loadings were below 0.40 on all factors, and if the Cronbach's alpha of a dimension increased when the item was deleted. This procedure was repeated until the Cronbach's alphas of all factors were above 0.70.

Based on this procedure, work experience was grouped into four dimensions (interaction with customers, expansion of professional duties, working with bosses and colleagues, regrettable events) in the early stage, and six dimensions (inspiring experience, interaction with customers, expansion of professional duties, attainment of difficult tasks, increase of referrals, working with bosses and colleagues) in the later

stage (Tables 1 and 2).

Table 1. Work Experience in the Early Stage.

Work experience in the early stage (1-5 years)	Factor loadings
F1 Interaction with customers ($\alpha=.89$)	
Trusted by customers and got referrals.	.74
Accomplished difficult tasks	.72
Complied with difficult requests from customer	.70
Got referrals from existing customers	.62
Was entrusted with and succesfully coped with important tasks	.56
Appreciated by customers	.56
Scolded by customers	.50
Had relationships with traders in related industries	.50
Developed relationship with customers by solving their complaints	.50
F2 Expansion of professional duties ($\alpha=.73$)	
Was transferred to different branch, scope of job expanded	.61
Was entrusted with leading subordinates, increased sense of responsibility	.59
Gained confidence by passing a qualifying examination for real estate agent	.54
Bar was raised on sales goals	.54
F3 Working with bosses and colleagues ($\alpha=.85$)	
Worked with respectable colleagues and bosses	.85
Trained by respectable bosses	.75
F4 Regrettable events ($\alpha=.75$)	
Was made fun of by colleagues and bosses and decided to get back at them	.72
Scolded by bosses	.54
Felt bitter when defeated by salespeople of other branches	.49
Felt bitter when losing a customer to a competing firm	.42

Following the same procedures described above, sales beliefs were also classified into two dimensions: customer orientation (CO) and goal-achievement orientation (GAO), as shown in Table 3. CO stresses enhancing customer satisfaction by providing sincere and quick service. GAO emphasizes the importance of goal attainment, self-management, and competition with other salespeople. The average scores of the two dimensions were used in the analyses.

Internal consistencies (Cronbach's alphas) of dimensions of work experience and sales beliefs are shown in Tables 1, 2, and 3. All of the measures were above 0.70,

ranging from 0.73 to 0.89, and were deemed satisfactory.

Table 2. Work Experience in the Later Stage.

Work experience in the latter stage (6-10 years)	Factor loadings
F1 Inspiring experience ($\alpha=.78$)	
Scolded by bosses	.65
Acquired sales skills through training	.62
Was made fun of by colleagues and bosses and decided to get back at them	.61
Gained confidence by passing a qualifying examination for real estate agent	.55
Acquired sales skills by working with veteran salespersons	.55
Felt bitter when defeated by salespeople of other branches	.54
Supervised by stern bosses	.51
F2 Interaction with customers ($\alpha=.81$)	
Scolded by customers	.66
Complied with difficult requests from customer	.62
Appreciated by customers	.51
Accomplished difficult tasks	.51
Dealt with serious complaints	.48
Felt bitter when losing a customer to a competing firm	.43
F3 Expansion of professional duties ($\alpha=.83$)	
Was entrusted with leading subordinates, increased sense of responsibility	.70
Was transferred to different branch, scope of job expanded	.55
Had relationships with traders in related industries	.51
Bar was raised on sales goals	.41
F4 Attainment of difficult tasks ($\alpha=.82$)	
Completed the work by own effort	.68
Was entrusted with and successfully coped with important tasks	.52
Gained confidence by accomplishing harder goals	.47
Gained confidence when my efforts bore fruit	.45
Pay raised and got ambitious to increase salary even more	.42
F5 Increase of referral ($\alpha=.74$)	
Got referrals from existing customers	.81
Trusted by customers and got referrals.	.77
F6 Working with bosses and colleagues ($\alpha=.84$)	
Worked with respectable colleagues and bosses	.61
Trained by respectable bosses	.58

Table 3. Sales Beliefs

Sales belief items	Factor loadings
F1: Customer orientation ($\alpha = .88$)	
Don't make a customer regret their decisions	.70
Fulfill promises to customer	.64
Always provide sincere service	.82
React quickly to customer needs	.78
Establish a trustful relationship with customer	.71
Try to be fond of the customer	.56
Think from a customer's point of view	.63
Make the customer satisfied	.83
F2: Goal achievement orientation ($\alpha = .82$)	
Continuation is important for selling	.59
Self-management	.56
Attain goals without fail	.57
Give maximum effort towards problem solving	.46
Don't lose in competition with others	.32
Reject what is impossible	.24

A score for the importance of work experience (using a 7-point Likert scale) was not used. Instead, the total score of the frequency data for work experience (experienced = 1; not experienced = 0) was calculated for each dimension and used as the work experience variable. This means that sales experience refers to the extent to which salespeople have experienced the 10 dimensions, rather than the perceived importance of the dimensions.

RESULTS

Table 4 provides descriptive statistics and pair wise correlations between variables. Since some work experiences are highly intercorrelated, simple regression analyses of the relationship between work experiences and sales performance were conducted in order to avoid multicollinearity. As shown in Table 5, “expansion of professional duties” ($\beta = .19$, $p < .01$) was positively related to sales performance in the early stage, while “expansion of professional duties” ($\beta = .21$, $p < .001$), “attainment of difficult tasks” ($\beta = .23$, $p < .001$), and “increase of referral” ($\beta = .17$, $p < .05$) in the latter stage were positively related to current sales performance. The results indicate that salespeople who experienced expansion of professional duties in the first five years, attained difficult tasks and got referral customers in the next five years tend to perform well at present. This suggests that salespeople tend to learn from job-related work experience rather

than others, and that learning from challenging job (e.g., attainment of difficult tasks) is activated in the latter stage of the first 10 years.

The hypothesis predicts that sales beliefs moderate the relationship between work experience and sales performance. To examine the moderating effect of sales beliefs on the relationship between work experience and sales performance, an analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) was conducted for each work experience and sales belief. Sales beliefs (CO and GAO) were transformed into categorical variables (high and low) based on median scores. The equation model is: Sales performance = work experience + sales belief + work experience*sales belief. To identify the nature of interactions, simple regressions were performed in both high and low groups of sales beliefs.

As shown in Table 6, there were significant main effects of “expansion of professional duties” ($F(1, 188) = 5.03, p < .05$) in the early stage, “expansion of professional duties” ($F(1, 188) = 5.84, p < .05$), “attainment of difficult tasks” ($F(1, 188) = 13.33, p < .01$), and “increase of referral” ($F(1, 188) = 3.91, p < .10$) in the latter stage. The results replicated those of regression analyses shown in Table 5.

There were significant interaction effects of CO and “interaction with customers” ($F(1, 188) = 4.63, p < .05$), “working with bosses and colleagues” ($F(1, 188) = 5.84, p < .05$), and “regrettable events” ($F(1, 188) = 4.26, p < .05$) in the early stage. As simple regressions indicate, these work experiences were more strongly related to sales performance in the high-CO group than in the low-CO group. This suggests that customer-oriented salespeople learned a lot from experience with others (bosses, colleagues, and customers) in the first five years compared with less customer-oriented salespeople.

Similar results were obtained with regard to GAO (Table 7). There were significant interaction effects of GAO and “interaction with customers” ($F(1, 188) = 4.63, p < .05$), “working with bosses and colleagues” ($F(1, 188) = 5.84, p < .05$), and “regrettable events” ($F(1, 188) = 4.26, p < .05$) in the early stage, and “attainment of difficult tasks” ($F(1, 188) = 5.68, p < .05$) in the latter stage (Table 7). This indicates that salespeople with strong goal achievement beliefs learn from experience with others in the first five years and difficult tasks in the next five years more than those with weak goal achievement beliefs. The results described above partially support the hypothesis that predicts the moderating effect of sales beliefs on the relationship between work experience and sales performance.

Table 4. Descriptive Statistics and Correlations.

	No. of items	Mean	Std.dev.	Cronbach's alpha	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
1 Performance	1	.30	.82	N.A.												
2 Customer orientation	8	6.07	.81	.88	-.02											
3 Goal achievement orientation	6	5.99	.89	.82	.16	.60										
4 Interaction with customers(1)	9	8.56	1.23	.89	.06	.01	.01									
5 Expansion of the professional duties (1)	4	3.39	.91	.73	.18	-.07	-.06	.57								
6 Working with bosses and colleagues (1)	2	1.92	.35	.85	.00	.14	.06	.50	.25							
7 Regrettable events	4	3.79	.56	.75	.04	-.06	-.03	.66	.49	.47						
8 Inspiring experience	7	6.33	1.10	.78	.04	-.05	-.09	.17	.25	.12	.30					
9 Interaction with customers (2)	6	5.81	.49	.81	.13	.05	.03	.20	.15	.15	.13	.53				
10 Expansion of the professional duties (2)	4	3.60	.78	.83	.21	-.05	-.04	.33	.55	.09	.22	.37	.27			
11 Attainment of difficult tasks	5	4.85	.41	.82	.24	-.01	.08	.18	.13	.13	.13	.32	.46	.37		
12 Increase of referral	2	1.95	.28	.74	.18	-.07	.00	.49	.32	.23	.23	.25	.28	.61	.26	
13 Working with bosses and colleagues (2)	2	1.93	.32	.84	.07	.09	.15	.11	.17	.37	.08	.32	.34	.20	.36	.14

Note: (1) = experience in the early stage, (2) = experience in the latter stage.

Table 5. Results of Simple Regression
(Dependent variable = sales performance).

Work Experience	β
Early stage (1-5years)	
Expansion of the professional duties	.19 **
Interaction with customers	.09
Working with bosses and colleagues	.02
Regrettable events	.07
Latter stage (6-10years)	
Expansion of the professional duties	.21 ***
Attainment of difficult tasks	.23 ***
Increase of referral	.17 *
Interaction with customers	.12
Working with bosses and colleagues	.07
Inspiring experience	.03

Note1: n = 192

Note2: *p < .05; **p < .01; ***p < .001

DISCUSSION

Theoretical Implications

The purposes of this study were to examine developmental experience at different career stages and to clarify the role of sales beliefs in promoting experiential learning of salespeople. By applying the theoretical framework of expertise research and cognitive psychology, this study found that (1) salespeople learn mainly from job assignments; (2) learning from challenging job experience is activated in the later stage (from 6 to 10 years) of a career; (3) salespeople with higher customer-oriented and goal-achievement

sales beliefs learn from others in the early stage; and (4) salespeople with higher goal achievement sales beliefs learn from difficult tasks in the later stage.

Table 6. Moderating Effect of Customer Orientation
(Dependent variable = sales performance)

Work experience	ANCOVA		Simple Regression	
	Main Effect of Experience	Interaction Effect (Experience*CO)	CO	
	n = 192		Low (n = 88)	High (n = 104)
	<i>F</i>		β	
Early stage (1-5years)				
Expansion of the professional duties	5.03 *	2.69	.04	.28 **
Interaction with customers	.64	4.63 *	-.10	.20 *
Working with bosses and colleagues	.40	5.84 *	-.16	.18 +
Regrettable events	.27	4.26 *	-.12	.17 +
Latter stage (6-10years)				
Expansion of the professional duties	5.84 *	1.10	.09	.27 **
Attainment of difficult tasks	13.33 **	2.35	.19 +	.30 **
Increase of referral	3.91 +	.00	.12	.20 *
Interaction with customers	2.43	.00	.17	.08
Working with bosses and colleagues	1.45	.46	.05	.10
Inspiring experience	.34	.13	.02	.05
Note1 : + p < .10; *p < .05; **p < .01				
Note2: CO = Customer Orientation				

Table 7. Moderating Effect of Goal Achievement Orientation
(Dependent variable = sales performance)

Work experience	ANCOVA		Simple Regression	
	Main Effect of Experience	Interaction Effect (Experience*GAO)	GAO	
	n = 192		Low (n = 100)	High (n = 92)
	F		β	
Early stage (1-5years)				
Expansion of the professional duties	7.34 **	.90	.13	.24 *
Interaction with customers	1.14	4.17 *	-.08	.19 +
Working with bosses and colleagues	1.47	8.29 **	-.19	.21 *
Regrettable events	.64	4.00 *	-.10	.17 +
Latter stage (6-10years)				
Expansion of the professional duties	10.26 **	.05	.26 **	.20 +
Attainment of difficult tasks	14.16 **	5.68 *	.13	.34 **
Increase of referral	6.19 *	.20	.22 *	.13
Interaction with customers	2.17	.01	.15	.07
Working with bosses and colleagues	.36	.10	.04	.04
Inspiring experience	.70	.49	.12	.01
Note1 : + p < .10; *p < .05; **p < .01				
Note2: GAO = Goal Achievement Orientation				

The theoretical contribution of this study to the experiential learning literature can be summarized as follows. First, job-related work experiences, such as “expansion of professional duties,” are critical for experiential learning in the first 10 years of a career. The results are consistent with previous findings stating that challenging job assignments are main sources of experiential learning (Davies & Easterby-Smith, 1984; McCall, 1998; McCall, Lombardo, & Morrison, 1988; McCauley et al., 1994). Considering the differences of samples between past research (senior managers or executives in Western firms) and the present research (salespeople of a Japanese firm), the importance of challenging job experience could be generalized across cultures, rank of management, and functions. As Davies and Easterby-Smith (1984) point out, people learn from a challenging job, as it forces people to explore new things.

Second, this study empirically demonstrates that learning from a challenging job is activated in the later stage of the first 10 years of a career. Salespeople who had expanded professional duties and attained difficult tasks during years 6 to 10 of their career tend to attain high performance at present. The results reveal that experience in the first five years can be a basis for learning from challenging jobs during the next five years. The present research indicates that there must be “readiness to learn” from challenging job experience. That is, prerequisite basic skills are required for salespeople as a prior condition for learning from challenging experience.

Research in management education (e.g., Forrest & Peterson, 2006) has pointed out the importance of readiness to learn and argued that teachers should explain the relevance of the subject to students. The present research suggests that sales managers should consider salespeople’s readiness to learn in terms of skills and knowledge. The results also indicate the importance of the instruction paradigm called ICM (increasingly complex microworlds) (Burton, Brown, & Fischer, 1984). The ICM paradigm proposes that individuals learning complex skills should be exposed to a sequence of environments in which their tasks become increasingly complex. To facilitate experiential learning at the workplace, further research is needed to develop a phased learning model by combining the 10 years rule of expertise (Ericsson, 1996), five-step model by Dreyfus and Dreyfus (1987), and ICM.

Third, the theoretical implication is that sales beliefs may work as abilities to learn from the experience of working with others, or absorptive capacity (Cohen & Levinthal, 1990) at the individual level. Although correlations between sales beliefs and sales performance are weak (CO: $r = 0.02$, n.s.; GAO: $r = 0.16$, $p < 0.05$), sales beliefs

moderated the relationship between work experience and performance, especially in the early stage of a career. This study revealed that sales beliefs promote learning activities in the long term rather than sales performance in the short term. Unlike prior research that focuses on employees' attitude (Spreitzer, McCall, & Mahoney, 1997) or self-esteem (Brutus et al., 2000), this study found the role of sales beliefs in facilitating experiential learning of salespeople.

The findings show that balancing customer-oriented and goal-achievement beliefs may enhance ability to learn from the experience of working with others. One explanation is that the two beliefs may facilitate seeking and using evaluative feedback from customers and bosses. Spreitzer, McCall, and Mahoney (1997) developed the scale of ability to learn from experience, which emphasizes the importance of seeking opportunities for learning and seeking feedback from others. Goal achievement beliefs may force salespeople to seek opportunities for learning because they have to get more selling chances to achieve their goals. On the other hand, customer-oriented beliefs may direct salespeople to seek feedback from customers and bosses on whether their selling activities satisfy customers or not. It is important for junior salespeople in the early stage to have much experience and obtain feedback that facilitates acquisition of basic selling skills.

Several studies provide a framework for interpreting the meaning of customer-oriented and goal-achievement beliefs. Cropanzano, Goldman, and Folger (2005) and Meglino and Korsgaard (2004) argue that other-orientation and self-interest are fundamental human motives that influence behaviors and attitudes. Saxe and Weitz (1982) also noted that interpersonal behavior models incorporate two dimensions—concern for self and concern for others—and that customer orientation is related to concern for others. Because customer orientation could be regarded as a type of other-orientation, and goal achievement orientation is closely related to self-interest, the findings of this research may to some extent be universally applicable.

Of two sales beliefs, customer orientation of salespeople or service workers has been investigated in the field of service marketing. Brown et al. (2002) defined customer orientation as an employee's tendency or predisposition to meet customer needs in an on-the-job context. Although service marketing researchers have mainly focused on the effect of customer orientation on job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and organizational citizenship behaviors (Boles et al., 2001; Brown et al., 2002; Donavan, Brown, & Mowen, 2004; Franke & Park, 2006; Harris, Mowen, & Brown, 2005), little research has examined its role in facilitating experiential learning. This study may be the first empirical research to reveal the relevance of customer

orientation in promoting experiential learning.

Practical Implications

The findings of this study have some practical implications. First, sales managers should play leading roles in assigning jobs to salespeople in order to promote experiential learning. For example, salespeople should be encouraged to expand their jobs by taking responsibility for leading subordinates, working at different branches, having more difficult goals set, and having relationships with traders in related industries. The experiences may help them to acquire new knowledge and skills.

Second, sales managers must recognize the timing for assigning challenging jobs to salespeople. A phased approach, assigning jobs to salespeople in proportion to their experience, may be effective in facilitating experiential learning. In the first five years, salespeople have to acquire basic skills through working with others such as bosses, colleagues, and customers. The next five years (years 6 to 10 of a career) constitute the important period for learning from difficult tasks. Salespeople at this stage should deal with hard tasks such as completing work by their own effort, or accomplishing harder goals. Effective learning is unlikely to occur if salespeople engage in the challenging tasks too early in their careers, because they do not have appropriate basic skills.

Finally, sales managers should be aware of the role of sales beliefs as absorptive capacity to learn from others. It is desirable for salespeople to strike a balance between customer satisfaction and goal achievement, which facilitate experiential learning, especially in the early career stages. Training and evaluation systems that aim to enhance both orientations may be effective in activating experiential learning in an organization. Sales managers also need to recognize that customer orientation has no short-term effect in enhancing performance, but it facilitates learning capability of salespeople in the long run.

Limitations and Future Research

The limitations of this study should be acknowledged. First, the data of this study are limited to real estate salespeople. It is necessary to clarify the effect of task traits and national culture on experiential learning process by conducting surveys in various industries and cultures.

Second, since the career stages were divided into two periods in this study, a more detailed and sophisticated stage model should be applied to investigate the experiential learning process in the first 10 years. Exploring experiential learning after 10 years of career is also an important research topic.

Third, the present research assumes that sales beliefs are relatively stable across time when analyzing the moderating effect of sales beliefs on the experience–performance relationship. However, it is possible that sales beliefs change over time. Longitudinal study is needed to reveal how sales beliefs are formed and whether and how they change across time.

Finally, this study measured customer orientation and goal achievement orientation at the level of beliefs. However, previous research measured customer orientation or learning orientation at the behavioral level. In future research, it would be interesting to measure customer orientation and goal achievement orientation at multiple levels and examine the effects of the level of constructs on experiential learning.

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