

# **The Relationship between Sales Skills and Salesperson Performance, and the Impact of Organizational Commitment as a Moderator: An Empirical Study in a Malaysian Telecommunications Company**

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## **ABSTRACT**

The objectives of this paper are two-fold. Firstly to understand the influence of sales skills dimensions, namely interpersonal, salesmanship, technical and marketing skills on salesperson performance in Telekom Malaysia (TM) Berhad, which is a major Malaysian telecommunication corporation; and secondly, to investigate the effect of organizational commitment as a moderating variable on the above relationship. Data was gathered based on a judgment sample of 114 salespersons supervisors in the company. The findings show that the effects of interpersonal skills positively influence salesperson performance. However, more unexpectedly, the findings also show that salesmanship, technical and marketing skills do not influence salesperson performance. And, organizational commitment does not necessarily moderate the relationship between sales skills dimensions and salesperson performance.

**Keywords:** Sales skills, salesperson performance, organizational commitment, telecommunications, Malaysia

The telecommunication services industry in Malaysia has undergone tremendous change - deregulation, new competition, and a rapidly changing customer base from the late 1980s. Since that time, six new operators or service providers have entered the market (International Telecommunications Union (ITU) Report, 2002; 2004; 2010). However, industry consolidation in 2002 resulted in just four key players in the industry, namely DiGi Telecommunications (DiGi), Maxis Communications

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(Maxis), TIME dotcom (TIME) and the incumbent, TM Berhad (TM) (ITU, 2004). As a result of consolidation, there has been more intense competition than ever before among these competitors to maintain or gain market share. Moreover, the competitive forces are exacerbated as the Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission (MCMC) continually issues new licences to smaller or niche players. As of the fourth quarter 2007, there were 368 Applications Service Provider (ASP) licensees, 68 Network Facilities Providers (NFP) individual licensees and 76 Network Services Provider (NSP) individual licensees (MCMC Industry Performance Report Q4, 2007). Competition will be further accelerated when the domestic market is further liberalised to allow the participation of ASEAN registered companies in 2010 once the telecommunication agreement is ratified under the ASEAN Free Trade Area (AFTA) (TM Annual Report, 2005, 2007).

With respect to market share, TM Berhad has led and continues to exercise leadership with revenue of RM17.8 billion and 56% market share in 2007, compared to 59% in 2006. Meanwhile, Maxis improved its market share to 29% from 27% in 2007 and 25% in 2003. Similarly, DiGi also increased its market share to 14% from 13% in 2007 and 9% in 2003. However, TIME lost another 1% (from 2%) of its market share falling to just 1% in 2007 (MCMC Industry Report, 2007). TM's market share shrank by 2% and 3% in 2006 and 2007 respectively. TM also turned a rather modest 8.8% revenue year-on-year growth in 2007, compared to 12.3% in 2004 (MCMC Industry Report, 2004; 2005; 2007; TM Annual Report, 2005; 2007).

At a glance, the latest statistics on market share and business indicate that intense competition has influenced TM's business performance. Extant and future competitive market forces have created great pressure on TM Berhad to market more effectively so that the company not only retains but improves its market and revenue positions. Selling products or services is the most important component in a sales oriented business. Thus, sales groups are forced to work harder in order to produce the revenue streams that support all of TM's business activities. Furthermore, rapid technological advancement result in complex and dynamic environs where consumers are getting smarter and expect the best from sellers to fulfill their demands and satisfy their needs (Atuahene-Gima and Michael, 1998). Therefore, salespersons in sales groups are perhaps the most important individuals in the firm's marketing communication process since they occupy a boundary position. They represent the organisation to customers, interact with them, underpin many transactions, and serve as a mechanism to scan and monitor the external environment (Sohi, 1996). The need to increase market share and be the (or a) preferred service provider or seller is a continual managerial motivator in understanding the factors that underpin salesperson performance. Meanwhile, sales are one of the commonly used variables to gauge salesperson performance (Morris *et al*, 1991).

Although there are many factors that contribute to salesperson performance, it has been acknowledged that sales skills are one of the key individual-level determinants that contribute to performance (Basir *et al.*, 2010; Churchill *et al.*,

1985; Churchill *et al.*, 2000). Ingram *et al.*, (2004) added that turbulent business environments force sales departments to headhunt highly skilled salespersons in their attempt to secure and consolidate sales. Thus, good salespersons may offer substantial performance improvements in today's business environs (Baldauf and Cravensm, 2002). Top-quality sales staff who maximize revenues from existing customers and systematically identify, convert, and manage new prospects well will allow a business to grow faster than its competitors (Futrell, 2006). Such efforts are particularly important in an environment where valuable customers have many more options and choices than ever before. Considering the pivotal role played by salespersons in ensuring continual sales; hiring and retained highly skilled sales personnel is critical (Churchill *et al.*, 2000; Ingram *et al.*, 2004; Futrell, 2006). Moreover, many researchers have emphasised the importance of salespersons skill levels in relation to their performance (Churchill *et al.*, 1985; 2000; Rentz *et al.*, 2002).

Churchill *et al.*, (1985) and Ford *et al.*, (1988) found that besides aptitude; role perception, motivation, personality and organisational factors, sales skills also affect a salesperson's performance. Moreover, in another study, Rentz *et al.*, (2002) categorised selling skills into three dimensions namely interpersonal, salesmanship and technical skills. These dimensions were found to be useful predictors of salesperson performance. Furthermore, Ahearne and Schillewaert (2000) introduced marketing skills as another predictor of a salesperson's performance.

However and although these sales skills dimensions have long been recognised as predictors of salesperson performance, since TM Berhad's privatisation, there has been no empirical research conducted to ascertain whether individual-level skill factors do in fact contribute to sales performance. Furthermore, the majority of previous studies examining the influence of sales skills dimensions on salesperson performance have been conducted in advanced Western economies. Thus, there is a gap in the literature – as no such research has been conducted within a specific company in any sector, or indeed within in the telecommunications industry in Malaysia, which is seen as a developing economy and one of the 'tiger' economies of Southeast Asia. Hence, this is the first study in a specific company, within a liberalised telecommunications industry, and within a developing country that attempts to explore these types of relationships.

In order to explore the two overarching objectives – a) to examine the selling skills dimensions, namely, interpersonal, salesmanship, technical and marketing skills and the influence they have upon salesperson performance, and – b) to examine the effect of organisational commitment on this relationship as the moderating variable; we provide a detailed literature review leading to four hypotheses exploring the relationship between four sales skills dimensions and performance. We then develop a further four hypotheses relating to the moderating variable of organisational commitment. A detailed method section is then provided followed by presentation and discussion of the research outcomes. We then summarise and conclude the paper.

## THEORETICAL REVIEW

Several studies have identified a number of independent variables that influence salesperson performance (see Churchill *et al.*, 1985; Baldauf and Cravens, 1999; 2002; Piercy *et al.*, 1997; 1998; Baldauf *et al.*, 2001; Babakus, *et al.*, 1996; Barker, 1999; Rentz *et al.*, 2002). Churchill *et al.*, (1985) found that in terms of the average size of their association with salesperson performance, the determinants were ordered as follows:

- role variables, selling skills, motivation, personal factors, aptitude, and organisational factors; *but*
- when ordered according to real variation (i.e., not attributable to sampling error), the determinants were ranked as: personal factors, selling skills, role variables, aptitude, motivation, and organisational/environmental factors.

The findings from Churchill *et al.*, (1985) indicated that selling skills were the second most important of six variables, both in terms of average size association with performance and in terms of real variation. However, Churchill *et al.*, (1985) and Rentz *et al.*, (2002) observed that few studies on individual characteristics relating to the selling skills dimensions of salespersons were conducted before the meta-analysis studies of Churchill *et al.*, (1985). Nonetheless, since these studies, a considerable amount of research has focused upon specific aspects or the micro-skill stream of selling skills, which focused on individual sales skills (Rentz *et al.*, 2002). These micro-stream selling skills can be divided into three dimensions – interpersonal, salesmanship and technical skills.

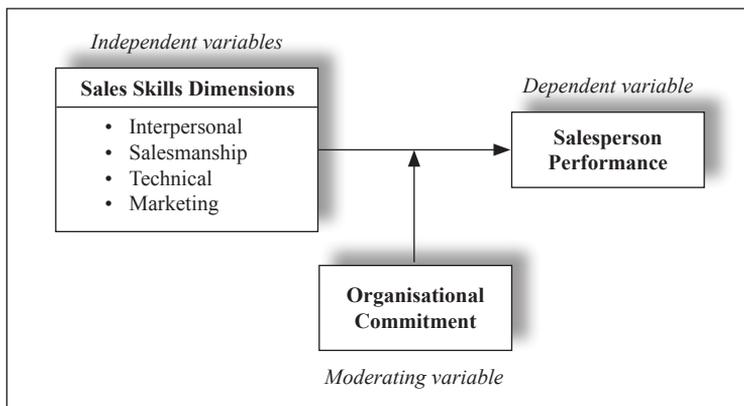
With respect to this, this paper attempts to build upon Churchill *et al.*'s, (1985) seminal work to examine the influence of sales skills on salesperson performance in an emerging economy context. Specifically, the paper investigates the influence of four sales skills dimensions on salesperson performance. Three sales skills dimensions – interpersonal, salesmanship and technical skills – are derived from Ford *et al.*, (1988; cited in Churchill *et al.*, 2000), and the other dimension of marketing skills is derived from Ahearne and Schillewaert (2000).

Although there have been numerous studies on the direct relationship between organisational commitment and job performance, however, there have been few studies conducted treating organisational commitment as a moderator. According to Meyer and Allen (1997), a committed employee is the one who stays with the organisation through thick and thin, attends work regularly, puts in a full day (and maybe more), protects company assets, shares company goals and others. Thus, having a committed workforce is an added organisational advantage. Irving and Coleman (2003), for example, examined the moderating effect of organisational commitment on the relationship between role ambiguity and job tension in an organisation undergoing significant change. Results of their study indicated that

organisational commitment tended to aggravate relations between the two variables. From a different perspective, Chang (1999) examined the effect of organisational commitment as a moderator on the relationship between perceptions of a company's career practices and turnover intention. The results showed that organisational commitment had some bearing on turnover intention. Furthermore, Thakor and Joshi (2002) studied the relationship between experienced meaningful and customer-oriented selling, which acted as a proxy of long-term performance, with organisational commitment as a moderator. Their research – based on a survey of 281 salespersons – indicated that organisational commitment served to moderate the relationship between the two variables.

Thus, in sum, organisational commitment can and does play a role in influencing job performance. Nonetheless, the literature reviewed showed that no previous study utilised organisational commitment to moderate the relationship between sales skills dimensions and salesperson performance. Hence, the present study simply focuses on the moderating impact of affective organisational commitment towards salesperson performance. Affective commitment was used in the present study because employees' emotional attachment to, identification with, and involvement in the organisation may contribute to the achievement of organisational objectives according to Harif (2005).

The present study examines the relationship between selling skills dimensions (interpersonal, salesmanship, technical, and marketing) and salesperson performance. The effect of organisational commitment on this relationship is explored as a moderating variable. The relationships among the variables are shown in Figure 1.



**Figure 1** Theoretical framework

## **Interpersonal Skills and Salesperson Performance**

Interpersonal skills refer to mental and communication algorithms applied during social communication and interaction to achieve certain effects and results. According to Rentz *et al.*, (2002), the dimensions of interpersonal skills are listening, empathy, optimism and perceived observation skills. These dimensions were operationalised and empirically tested independently to represent interpersonal skills measures in predicting salesperson performance. Thus, these dimensions are likely to collectively realise effective interpersonal skills, and, in turn, salesperson performance for achieving high sales performance leading to the requirement that salespeople have or develop strong interpersonal skills. Comer and Drollinger (1999); Castleberry and Shepherd (1993); Ramsey and Sohi (1997), and Shepherd *et al.*, (1997) found that effective listening skills are a valuable communication skill for successful salespersons. Meanwhile, Comer and Drollinger (1999) pointed out that empathetic skills contribute to salesperson performance. McBane (1995), Pilling and Eroglu (1994), and Plank *et al.*, (1996) support this. Additionally, Rich and Smith (2000) found that individuals possessing high responsive characteristics seem to have greater identification or perceptive observation skills concerning the social style of others, which are critical traits for successful salespersons. Jane and Dawn (2003) also suggested that empathy and perception of others emotions could explain salesperson performance. Rapisarda (2002) in her research on the impact of emotional intelligence on work performance reaffirmed that empathic competency strongly correlated with performance. In sum, previous empirical studies demonstrated a positive relationship between the four dimensions of interpersonal skills on salesperson performance. Hence, it can be hypothesised that a similar relationship will occur in this study. Thus, the first hypothesis is:

*H1: There is a significant positive relationship between interpersonal skills and salesperson performance.*

## **Salesmanship Skills and Salesperson Performance**

The dimensions of salesmanship skills can be generally categorised into five subcategories namely: adaptability, consultative selling, negotiation and questioning, and salesperson cues and communication style skills. Previous studies had utilised each dimension independently to represent salesmanship skills in testing its relationship with salesperson performance (Rentz *et al.*, 2002). Adaptive selling is defined as the salesperson's ability to alter her/his sales behaviour when interacting with customers (Weitz, 1981) and is important because it shows the amount of customisation a salesperson is utilises. Babakus *et al.*, (1996) found a positive association between adaptive selling and salesperson performance, and

sales organisational effectiveness measures. Boorum *et al.*, (1998) also reported a positive relationship between adaptive selling and several sales outcomes. Besides that, Sujan *et al.*, (1988a) also found a positive relationship between working smart (a dimension of adaptive selling) and salesperson performance. Negotiation is another important process of selling (Futrell, 2006; Ingram *et al.*, 2004). Goolby *et al.*, (1992), and Schuster and Danes (1986) posited that negotiation skills possessed by a salesperson contributed to the salesperson's success. Meanwhile, Morgan and Stoltman (1990) found that there was a positive relationship between adaptive personal selling and questioning, listening, and non-verbal behaviour. They stated that a salesperson's perceptual abilities, including probing, asking questions, listening, and detecting verbal and nonverbal clues, provide the basis for adaptive selling. Goolby *et al.*, (1992) and Schuster and Danes (1986) confirmed these findings when they posited that negotiation and questioning ability possessed by a salesperson contributed to the salesperson's success. Additionally, communication style plays a critical influence on a salesperson's ability to close sales (Stafford, 1996; Whittler, 1994; Williams *et al.*, 1990; Futrell, 2006). Williams and Spiro (1985) found that successful salespersons are those who can adapt their communication styles appropriately to interact with customers. Similarly, William *et al.*, (1990) also suggested that salespersons who vary their communication styles in relation to the customers will significantly increase the potential to close the sale. Furthermore, a person's nonverbal cues could influence others behaviour (Cho, 2001). Salesperson's nonverbal cues have emerged as a critical component of successful selling (Leigh and Summers, 2002; Futrell, 2006; Stafford, 1996; Whittler, 1994; Williams *et al.*, 1990). William *et al.*, (1990) posited that employing four nonverbal symbolic expressions such as voice qualities, nonverbal vocalisation, body movement, and spatial distances might result in the likelihood of a sale. Likewise, Peterson *et al.*, (1995); Schul and Lamb (1982); and Gabbot and Hogg (2000) found that certain voice characteristics correlated highly with output sales performance. Consultative skills are another aspect of salesmanship which influences salesperson performance (DeCormier and Jobber, 1993; Goolsby *et al.*, 1992). Therefore, any conscious effort on the part of the salesperson to adjust the sales environment, based on cues from the buyer, and coupled with other complementary salesmanship skills, namely, consultative selling practices, ability to be an excellent negotiator, skill in probing and questioning customer needs, and possessing commendable communication skills, either verbal or nonverbal; should give the seller a positive feeling in terms of their performance as a salesperson. Therefore, the discussion above suggests the second hypothesis is:

*H2: There is a significant positive relationship between salesmanship skills and salesperson performance.*

## Technical and Marketing Skills Influence on Salesperson Performance

Technical knowledge refers to salespersons skills in providing information about design and specification of products and the applications and functions of both products and services. Salespersons also possess knowledge about the industry and trends in general such as customers, markets and products; competitors products, services, sales policies; knowledge of competitors product lines, and knowledge of customer operations (Behrman and Perreault, 1982, as cited in Baldauf and Cravens, 2002; Futrell, 2006). These constitute the marketing skills of a salesperson. Thus, both knowledge assets refer to the level of understanding a salesperson has about the business in which he or she operates. An extensive knowledge base is important for a salesperson since it allows them to cope with the complex market environment. A positive relationship empirically supports that the use of technical knowledge results in higher salesperson performance (Babakus *et al.*, 1996; Cravens *et al.*, 1993; Baldauf and Cravens, 2002). Moreover, Churchill *et al.*, (2000), Schoemaker and Johlke (2002), and Ingram *et al.*, (2004) revealed that knowledge of external and organisational environmental issues are crucial for salespersons to perform their selling tasks. Researchers have also identified that customer knowledge is critical for salesperson performance (see Donath, 1993; Smith and Owens, 1995). Ingram *et al.*, (2004); and Pettijohn and Pettijohn (1994) supported this when they found that customer knowledge is an important topic for salesperson training. It is also recognised that effective salespersons possess richer and more interrelated knowledge structures about their customers than those that are less effective (Sujan *et al.*, 1988b). Moreover, Weitz (1978) posited that there is a significant positive relationship between performance and strategy formulation capabilities (i.e. which requires extensive knowledge of the market, competitors, products etc).

Additionally, Ahearne and Schillewaert (2000) confirmed that marketing skills also influence salesperson performance. Meanwhile, Sengupta *et al.*, (2000) found that two other individual-level variables, namely, strategic ability and intrapreneurial ability were significant determinants of salesperson effectiveness or performance. Likewise, Dariane *et al.*, (2001) and Makinen (2004) found that salesperson's product knowledge is important. Complementing the two studies, Ingram *et al.*, (2004) added and reiterated that the knowledge that a salesperson should possess include product benefits, applications, competitive strengths, and limitations. These findings and discussions provide the basis for the third and fourth hypotheses dealing with salesperson performance:

*H3: There is a significant positive relationship between technical skills and salesperson performance.*

*H4: There is a significant positive relationship between marketing skills and salesperson performance.*

## **The Moderating Effect of Organisational Commitment on Salesperson Performance**

While interpersonal, salesmanship, technical and marketing skills have been shown as key determinants of salesperson performance in previous research, they are not the only factors that influence salesperson performance. As activities take place within organisational contexts, the effects of affective organisational commitment on sales skills dimensions can be expected and anticipated (Dutto *et al.*, 1994). Organisational commitment is defined as a state of physiological congruence between individuals and organisational values (Mowday *et al.*, 1979).

The commitment to fulfilling the needs and wants of customers are now commonly held organisational values across the industrial landscape. Accordingly, it is argued that when a salesperson's selling skills (that is constituted by the four dimensions) level is high, organisational commitment will stimulate them to accomplish good sales, which in turn will be rewarded and recognised by the organisation upon successful completion of this activity. Several previous studies found a direct relationship between organisational commitment and job performance (e.g., Mowday *et al.*, 1974, as cited in Yousef, 2000; Baugh and Robert, 1994; Ward and Davies, 1995; Mayer and Schoorman, 1992; Putti *et al.*, 1990). Meanwhile, Brett and Slocum (1995) reported that there are stronger relationships between organisational commitment and performance for those with low financial requirements than those with high financial requirements. Benkhoff (1997) investigated the link between employee commitment and organisational commitment in terms of sales targets met and improved profitability; and the study found there was a strong relationship. Zabid *et al.*, (2003) also found that organisational commitment correlated with financial performance. Moreover, Meyer and Schoorman (1992) examined the relationship between job performance and affective and continuance commitment; and concluded that affective commitment is directly correlated; and continuance is correlated inversely with all measure of performance. On the other hand, some studies discovered a modest relationship between organisational commitment and job performance (e.g, Kelleberg and Marsden, 1995). In contrast, Wright (1997) found a negative relation correlation between measures of organisational commitment and job performance.

Thakor and Joshi (2002) studied the relationship between experienced meaningful and customer-oriented selling, which acted as a proxy of long-term performance, with organisational commitment as a moderator. Research results showed that organisational commitment did moderate the relationship between the two variables.

Thus, it is argued that when high organisational commitment is coupled with a high level of the four sales skills dimensions, each should reinforce the positive effect of the other on the salesperson's motivation to further improve their skills

and expand their efforts as required to achieve higher sales performance. Thus, it is hypothesised that:

*H5: The influence of interpersonal skills on salesperson performance is higher when organisational commitment is high.*

*H6: The influence of salesmanship skills on salesperson performance is higher when organisational commitment is high.*

*H7: The influence of technical skills on salesperson performance is higher when organisational commitment is high.*

*H8: The influence of marketing skills on salesperson performance is higher when organisational commitment is high.*

## METHODOLOGY

### Data Collection, Population and Sample

The unit of analysis in the present study is the individual and data was collected via a web/line judgement sampling procedure. The subjects of analysis were sales supervisors in TM Berhad. These supervisors hold diverse hierarchical positions in the organisation i.e. from Assistant Manager to General Managers of Sales Units. Moreover, the present study adopted a supervisor-rating evaluation approach i.e. the supervisor (rater) rated the subordinate (salesperson (s) being rated) under his or her supervision. This means that the immediate supervisors of the respective salespersons were given the questionnaires to rate their subordinates. The questionnaire was divided into three parts including demographic information; sales skills, namely, interpersonal, salesmanship, technical and marketing skills; and salesperson performance.

The supervisor-rating evaluation approach used in the present study was based on research on performance appraisal (e.g. Landy and Farr, 1980), which suggested that supervisor evaluation is superior because supervisors integrate many facets of performance, some of which are not readily quantifiable. The supervisor was extremely familiar with the subject's (the person being rated) performance. Moreover, the supervisor-rating approach was also used to rate the organisational commitment of the salespersons as opposed to the widely adopted self-rated approach to the scale. The supervisor-rating approach is a meaningful construct as proven by Shore *et al.*, (1995) and Allen (1994) in their studies on managerial perception of employee commitment to the organisation.

The items used to measure interpersonal skills, salesmanship skills and technical skills were adopted from Rentz *et al.*, (2002). While items used to measure marketing skills were adopted from Ahearne and Schillewaert (2000), salesperson performance items were adopted from Behrman and Perreault (1982).

Respondents were asked to indicate their agreement or disagreement with several statements on a seven-point Likert scale from 1=strongly disagree to 7=strongly agree. Cronbach's alpha obtained for the measures were 0.91 for technical skills, 0.87 for marketing skills, 0.79 for interpersonal skills, 0.75 for salesmanship skills and 0.81 for salesperson performance. In the context of the present study, the focus was on affective organisational commitment of the salespersons because the employees' emotional attachment to, identification with, and involvement in the organisation may contribute to the achievement of organisational objectives (Harif, 2005). Regarding this, the affective organisational commitment measures developed by Mowday *et al.*, (1979) were adapted. This construct consists of nine items. A seven-point scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree) was employed to measure the items. Concerning this, Allen (1994) utilised the supervisor-rating approach to measure the perceived organisational commitment of others, and it showed good reliability with a coefficient alpha of 0.77.

The sample for the empirical research consisted of 270 respondents, where each was identified as currently supervising at least one salesperson. The respondents were told that participation was voluntary and not compulsory, and – perhaps for this reason - only 114 respondents returned the completed on-line questionnaire. The demographic profiles of the respondents are presented in Table 1.

## FINDINGS

### Respondents' Profile

Of the 114 decision makers sampled, the majority were managers (50.0 percent), who had accumulated at least 6-10 years of sales experience (37%), which observably is a large part of their working experience. As such, the main bulk of the respondents had at least 6 years of work experience (32%). This confirms that respondents had relevant experience to rate their subordinates' performance. In addition, most of these business unit leaders were males (61%) and within the age group of 25-35 years of age (55%). This indicates the relatively new breed of youthful managers in Malaysia who are representative of the TM organisation's distribution of employees. The main bulk of the sample was from the Malay lineage (88%) with a minimum education of a bachelor's degree (75%). The profile of the respondents is shown in Table 1.

**Table 1** Supervisors profiles

Variables	Description	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	70	61.4
	Female	44	38.6
Age	< 25 years	10	8.77
	25-35 years	63	55.26
	36-45 years	33	28.95
	46-55 years	8	7.02
Race	Malay	100	87.7
	Indian	4	3.5
	Chinese	5	4.4
	Others	5	4.4
Educational Level	High School Certificate	4	3.5
	Diploma	5	4.4
	Bachelor's Degree	84	74.68
	Master's Degree	21	18.42
Position	Assistant Manager	28	24.56
	Manager	57	50.0
	Assistant General Manager	23	20.17
	General Manager and Above	6	5.27
Sales Experience	<1 year	7	6.14
	2-5 years	38	33.33
	6-10 years	42	36.83
	11-15 years	17	14.9
	>15 years	10	8.8
Working Experience	<1 year	1	.88
	2-5 years	9	7.89
	6-10 years	37	32.45
	11-15 years	30	26.33
	>15 years	37	32.45

## Salespersons' Profile

The majority of salespersons evaluated usually also had managerial titles, but had no supervision of subordinates. 39% of those evaluated has between 6-10 years of sales experience (73%), for TM Berhad. The salespersons were almost equal in terms of gender (52% male, 48% female) and the majorities were within the age range of 25-35 years (61%). In terms of racial distribution, the main bulk of the sample was from the Malay lineage (82%) with a minimum education of a bachelor's degree (70%).

## Goodness of Measures

### *Factor Analysis*

Survey-based research is constantly plagued and questioned over the quality of its measures. However, statistical procedures, to a certain extent, can ascertain the validity and reliability of these measures, assuming a sound theoretical assessment is considered in advance. Referring to the former, the validation procedure utilised in this study was factor analysis. This procedure allowed the researchers to ensure whether the reduced sets of items were similar to the number of concepts that were initially modeled.

**Table 2** Factor loadings for independent variables

Items	Factors			
	I	II	III	IV
<b>Technical Skills</b>				
Knowledgeable about product development	.81	.32	.14	.09
Knowledge of product performance	.82	.16	.21	.18
Understand product specifications	.85	.11	.23	.07
Knowledge of delivery process	.79	.33	.04	.21
Knowledge of product features	.64	.13	.24	.43
<b>Marketing Skills</b>				
Real time information	.37	.76	.25	.00
Is an excellent resource of competitive information	.32	.72	.37	.14
Has a lot information on industry trends	.20	.79	.16	.25
Is well-informed about important events in our industry	.10	.80	.20	.32
<b>Interpersonal Skills</b>				
Ability to express oneself	.06	.26	.76	-.01
Ability in general speaking	.09	.23	.70	.25
Awareness & understanding of non-verbal communication	.43	-.00	.70	.03
Ability to control & regulate emotion	.32	.21	.42	.21
Ability to influence	.15	.33	.61	.32
<b>Salesmanship Skills</b>				
Ability to get buy-in	.23	.27	.44	.51
Ability in sales presentation	.30	.11	.46	.68
Ability to service account	.15	.2	.02	.80
<b>Eigenvalue</b>	3.87	3.04	2.98	2.01
<b>Percentage Variance Explained (69.96)</b>	22.78	17.86	17.51	11.82
<b>Reliability (alpha)</b>	.91	.87	.79	.75
<b>KMO Measure of Sampling Adequacy</b>	.88			
<b><math>\chi^2</math> (d.f)</b>	1210.24 (136)			

In the present study, three factor analyses (see Tables 2 and 3) were run to verify the postulated dimensionality of the independent and dependent variables by utilising the Varimax rotation. It should be noted that all factor analyses were considered to have met their underlying assumptions based on their Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure of sampling adequacy, and where the diagonals of the anti-image correlation matrix were above 0.5. Sufficient unique loadings (for more than 1 extracted factor) and the ability for each item to account for a minimum of 50 percent of its variation were conditions set in retaining the items.

The examination of the 4-factor solution of the independent variables revealed a combined total variance explained of 70%. The majority of the variation was taken up by Technical Skills (23%), followed by Marketing (18%), Interpersonal (18%) and finally, Salesmanship Skills (12%).

The dependent variable of Salesperson Performance was also subjected to factor analysis and resulted in a similar one component factor. The three items accounted for 82.16% of the variation explained (see Table 3).

**Table 3** Factor loadings for salesperson performance (Dependent variable)

Items	Factor I
<b>Salesperson Performance</b>	
Effective contribution to market share	.89
Generate high level of sales	.93
Effective in exceeding sales target	.90
<hr/>	
<b>Eigenvalue</b>	2.47
<b>Percentage Variance Explained</b>	82.16
<b>Reliability (alpha)</b>	.89
<b>KMO Measure of Sampling Adequacy</b>	.73
<b><math>\chi^2</math> (d.f)</b>	198.431 (3)

A set of nine items measuring organisational commitment was included in the factor analysis. The statistical procedure confirmed it to be a one-factor solution with a total of 63.68% of the variation explained (see Table 4).

### ***Reliability Analysis***

Once the variables were validated, they were subjected to a test for internal consistency. This was done to determine the extent of agreement between the respondents for each dimension, such that a higher score would indicate a higher reliability. The computation of Cronbach's Alpha being well above the cut-off value of 0.70 (as suggested by Nunnally and Bernstein, 1994) indicated that all measures were reliable. The lowest Alpha registered a value of 0.75 (Salesmanship Skills) and

the highest 0.91 (Technical Skills). The Alpha coefficients for all dimensions are reported in the bottom sections of the factor analyses tables (see Tables 2, 3, and 4).

**Table 4** Factor loadings for organizational commitment (Moderating variable)

Items	Factor I
<b>Organizational Commitment</b>	
Put in a great deal of effort	.70
Talks-up the company	.85
Accept any type of assignment	.64
Values similar to company	.82
Proud to be associated with organization	.87
Organization inspires	.89
Glad they are employed by the company	.84
Care about the fate of the company	.73
Best organization to work for	.82
<b>Eigenvalue</b>	5.73
<b>Percentage Variance Explained</b>	63.68
<b>Reliability (alpha)</b>	.93
<b>KMO Measure of Sampling Adequacy</b>	.90
<b><math>\chi^2</math> (d.f)</b>	739.177 (36)

### *Descriptive Analysis*

Items representing their underlying factors were then aggregated. The mean was applied as a measure of central tendency, which indicated that all variables were above their midpoint level as indicated in Table 6. Of the four independent variables, Salesmanship Skills were the highest in rating ( $M = 5.57$ ), while Interpersonal Skills was the lowest ( $M = 5.37$ ). The dependent variable's (Salesperson Performance) mean values were also within the range of 5 to 6 in the 7-point Likert scale. In other words, all variables exhibited a standard deviation of less than 1.

**Table 5** Characteristics of the variables

Variables	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Interpersonal Skills	3.20	7.00	5.37	.63
Salesmanship Skills	3.00	7.00	5.57	.71
Technical Skills	3.00	7.00	5.48	.80
Marketing Skills	2.00	6.75	5.39	.84
Organizational Commitment	2.78	7.00	5.67	.88
Salesperson Performance	3.33	7.00	5.54	.83

***Predictive and Discriminant Validity***

One-tailed Pearson correlation tests were employed to assess predictive validity of the variables (please refer to Table 6 for the results of correlation). All independent variables were found to be significantly correlated with the dependent variable of Salesperson Performance, indicating the achievement of predictive validity. It is also important to note that all the independent variables were not highly correlated, as this is a necessary condition to ensure that strong multicollinearity effects are not present in the study.

**Table 6** Correlation between variables

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Interpersonal Skills	1					
2. Salesmanship Skills	.64**	1				
3. Technical Skills	.55**	.57**	1			
4. Marketing Skills	.62**	.59**	.58**	1		
5. Organizational Commitment	.40**	.32**	.28**	.40**	1	
6. Salesperson Performance	.63**	.54**	.51**	.52**	.49**	1

\*\* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level

***Hierarchical Regression Analysis***

In order to test the hypotheses developed for this study, a 3-step hierarchical regression was applied to study the differences with respect to the main effects, moderating direct effects and interaction effects (see Table 7). Sets of variables were entered consecutively, where variables on the 1<sup>st</sup> step consisted of all the independent variables (IVs). This was followed by the moderating variable in the 2<sup>nd</sup> step, and finally in the 3<sup>rd</sup> step, all of the interaction effects between each independent variable, and the moderating variables were entered into the model. In this step, it was discovered that only Interpersonal Skills ( $\beta = .40$ ,  $p < .01$ ) exhibited a positive influence on Salesperson Performance, which accounted for approximately 46 percent ( $\Delta R^2$ ) of the variation in the latter.

In the 2<sup>nd</sup> step of the analysis, Organisational Commitment (moderating variable) was introduced into the regression equation, Organisational Commitment had a significant positive relationship ( $\beta = 0.25$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ) with Salesperson Performance, and with an additional increase of 5 percent ( $\Delta R^2$ ) in the explained variance of Salesperson Performance.

The 3<sup>rd</sup> step of the hierarchical regression analysis introduces the interaction effects between the moderator and independent variables on Salesperson Performance as the dependent variable. However, there is no compelling evidence that Organisational Commitment moderates the relationship between the four types of skills and Salesperson Performance.

The Relationship between Sales Skills and Salesperson Performance

**Table 7** Hierarchical regression analysis

Variables	Salesperson performance		
	Step 1	Step 2	Step 3
Main Effects			
Interpersonal Skills	.40**		
Salesmanship Skills	.12		
Technical Skills	.15		
Marketing Skills	.11		
Moderator (Direct Effect)			
Organizational Commitment		.25**	
Interaction Effects			
Interpersonal Skills x Organizational Commitment			-1.28
Salesmanship Skills x Organizational Commitment			-.46
Technical Skills x Organizational Commitment			.50
Marketing Skills x Organizational Commitment			.62
<b>R2change</b>	.46	.05	.01
<b>F change</b>	22.83**	11.28**	.78
<b>Durbin-Watson Statistic</b>		1.69	

Note: \*\* p<0.01

### SUMMARY OF MAJOR FINDINGS AND RESULTS OF THE HYPOTHESES

Synthesising from the analyses, the results of the hypothesised assertions are indicated in Table 8. The following are the major findings gathered through the present study's relationship testing regime:

- Only one independent variable i.e. Interpersonal Skills had a positive influence on Salesperson Performance.
- Organisational Commitment does act as a predictor since the findings show that increasing Organisational Commitment will also relates to increase in Salesperson Performance.
- The influence of the four types of skills on Salesperson Performance, however, does not depend on the level of Organisational Commitment.

**Table 8** Results of the analyses

Hypothesis	Statement of Hypothesis	Supported?
H1	There is a significant positive relationship between Interpersonal Skills and Salesperson Performance	Yes
H2	There is a significant positive relationship between Salesmanship Skills and Salesperson Performance	No
H3	There is a significant positive relationship between Technical Skills and Salesperson Performance	No
H4	There is a significant positive relationship between Marketing Skills and Salesperson Performance	No
H5	The influence of Interpersonal Skills on Salesperson Performance is higher when Organizational Commitment is high	No
H6	The influence of Salesmanship Skills on Salesperson Performance is higher when Organizational Commitment is high	No
H7	The influence of Technical Skills on Salesperson Performance is higher when Organizational Commitment is high	No
H8	The influence of Marketing Skills on Salesperson Performance is higher when Organizational Commitment is high	No

## CRITICAL DISCUSSION

This paper set out to examine the selling skills dimensions, namely, interpersonal, salesmanship, technical and marketing skills and the influence they have upon salesperson performance. The effect of organisational commitment on this relationship is also explored as the moderating variable.

### Relationship between Interpersonal Skills and Salesperson Performance

This study found that there is a positive relationship between interpersonal skills and salesperson performance ( $\beta = 0.40$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ,  $\Delta R^2 = 0.46$ ). This finding is consistent with that of previous research, which demonstrated that interpersonal skills significantly predict salesperson performance (for instance, Ford *et al.*, 1988; Pilling and Eroglu, 1994; Anselmi and Zemanek, 1997; Rozell *et al.*, 2006). Another investigation, by Lockeman and Hallaq (1982), found that interpersonal skills were the main predictor of sales success. Similarly, many previous studies identified interpersonal skills as the single strongest predictor of performance rating dimensions of task performance, job dedication, and interpersonal facilitation, as well as for an overall rating of performance (for instances, Ferris *et al.*, 2001; Riggio and Taylor, 2000; Morgeso *et al.*, 2005; Payne, 2005). Additionally, Hill and Petty (1995) revealed that interpersonal skills were the strongest predictor of

employability. Furthermore, in a different research context, Jiang *et al.*, (2003) also established that interpersonal skills of information system's staff were significantly related to information system success (proxy of job performance). Moreover, Algae *et al.*, (2002) affirmed that interpersonal skills were positively related to job performance in their study of operators in a public service organisation.

The present study demonstrates a similar finding in that interpersonal skills do show a positive relationship with salesperson performance. Interpersonal skills reflect an individual's ability to interact successfully with others and generally foster positive interpersonal relationships (Gibson *et al.*, 1997). Hochwarter *et al.*, (2004); and Churchill *et al.*, (2000) stated that interpersonal skills were reflected in terms of effective persuasion, explanation, and other influencing mechanisms, which reveal the ability to persuade and control others. Thus, it is expected that the performance of those who have a high level of interpersonal skill will be better. Further, being socially astute may allow individuals to successfully navigate around obstacles that may derail subsequent performance. In this regard, it is plausible that those who possess high levels of interpersonal skills report the highest levels of performance.

The result from the present study demonstrates the importance of interpersonal skills as a means to improve salesperson performance. This result implies that salesperson performance can be enhanced by employing salespersons with high levels of interpersonal skills. Given a choice, most sales organisation will hope to have salespersons with higher interpersonal skills to improve sales performance or meet the sales objectives of an organisation (Ingram *et al.*, 2004; Futrell, 2006). Furthermore, hiring salespersons with a higher level of interpersonal skills, will probably result in sustaining and building customer loyalty, intention to repurchase, and the salespersons will be more likely to develop long lasting relationships with their customers in accordance with Manning and Reece (2004); and Weitz *et al.*, (1998). This finding is in agreement with one of the deliverables in the current TM's Key Business Plan milestones of TM Berhad whereby the Sales Division is directed to strengthen its sales team in terms of salesperson's skills and competence to drive revenue or sales (TM Malaysia Business Performance Initiative Plan 2006 Report).

### **Relationship between Technical Skills and Salesperson Performance**

Surprisingly there was no significant relationship in the present study between technical skills and salesperson performance. This was an unexpected finding in light of the volume of previous evidence supporting that technical skills influence salesperson performance (for instances, Baldauf *et al.*, 2001; Grants and Cravens, 1999; Katiskea and Skarmeas, 2003; Cravens *et al.*, 1993). Nonetheless, this finding is consistent with Ahearne and Schillewaert (2000); Barker (1999); and Piercy *et al.*, (1997) who established that high technical skills levels possessed by salespersons do not necessarily lead to positive effects in term of salespersons performance.

The absence of a significant relationship between technical skills and salesperson performance in the present study may be explained from three perspectives. First, a technically skilled salesperson sometimes suffers from the problem of transforming their technical knowledge into a manner that is understandable and comprehensible for their customer bases (Baldauf and Cravens, 2001). Given that the salespersons may have to sell diverse product ranges to diverse customers and markets, it is a reasonable expectation that salespersons may face difficulties in effectively applying their technical skills when performing sales activities in such complexity. In addition the service products sold are often high technology-related that necessarily undergoes continuous and rapid innovation. This may result in a salesperson's technical skills becoming easily obsolete.

Second, the insignificant relationship is due to the nature of the industry structure, products sold by the salesperson, and also the complexity of the sales organisational structure adopted by the corporation where the subjects were drawn from. Subjects of the present study were drawn from the service industry, which sells intangible products, i.e., provides telecommunication services to diverse customers ranging from institutions to individuals.

It has been demonstrated that selling intangible products is much more challenging compared to selling tangible goods as service products cannot be seen, tested, felt, or heard before they are purchased (Manning and Reece, 2004). Because of the inherent intangibility of services, consumers are often faced with not knowing what to expect from a service until they have consumed it, and hence, perceive services as risky (Coulter and Coulter, 2002). Therefore, it would be very hard to establish a correlation between technical skills and salesperson performance if salespersons with lower technical skills are tasked to sell such services as referred to in the present study. In this respect, the diverse kinds of services offerings i.e. more than 50 services, and the diverse range of markets or customers being served may compel companies to designate an engineering support team in each sales unit (either based on market, customers, product or sales regions). The engineering support team has to support the sales team in every aspect of technical matters pertaining to the products during pre-sale, sale and post-sale initiatives. Such arrangements thus reduce the necessity for salespersons to possess or hone sound technical skills. Therefore, it can be implied that most successful sales are mainly due to the capability of service engineers from the engineering support team to influence customers. Conspicuously, previous research has revealed that service salespersons need to possess commendable skills and knowledge about the service product they sell in order to influence the customers to purchase (Coulter and Coulter, 2002).

Third, the insignificant relationship may also be explained from the industry structure perception. Being the first telecommunication operator in Malaysia allows the organisation the advantage of owning a vast infrastructure nationwide and to monopolise most available resources that underpin the wide range of

telecommunications services products offered to the markets. Moreover, the organisation is the market leader with 59% of market share of the telecommunications industry in Malaysia (MCMC Industry Performance Report, 2005). When compared to its competitors these early entrant advantages enable the organisation to realise and offer an extensive range of telecommunication service products that the markets may need. Obviously, this means customers have few options to switch to other service providers since alternative providers may be unable to offer similar services. Moreover, migrating to alternative telecommunication service providers may incur high switching costs, service reliability and performance effect, and less after sales support, resulting in negative consequences for customers.

These viewpoints imply that technical skills become less crucial for salespersons operating in such an oligopolistic environment, and that technical skill, at least according to the salespersons supervisor in the present study, have little or no influence on their salespersons performance.

### **Relationship between Salesmanship Skills and Salesperson Performance**

The present study also found no relationship between salesmanship skills and salesperson performance. This means that a high level of salesmanship skills do not correlate with high performance. There was mixed support for the hypotheses concerning the main effect of salesmanship skills on salesperson performance. While some prior studies indicated a positive association between salesmanship skills and salesperson performance (for instances, Ford *et al.*, 1988; Baldauf *et al.*, 2001; Babakus *et al.*, 1996; Katsikan and Skarmeas, 2003; Baldauf and Cravens, 1999), other studies found no association (for instance, Ahearne and Schillewaert, 2000; Grant and Cravens, 1999; Piercy *et al.*, 1997); the results of the present study, with respect to the second hypothesis, indicate that salesmanship skills do not influence salesperson performance. This finding does not support the proposition that management can increase salesperson performance by having or recruiting salespersons with high salesmanship skills. Thus, it implies that programmes such as training and development of selling skills and having salespersons with greater sales experience, which possibly will increase salesmanship skills of salespersons, do not seem to have much bearing on improving salespersons performance.

The absence of a significant relationship between salesmanship skills and salesperson performance in the present study may be attributed to similar arguments given to why technical skills did not positively relate to salesperson performance. These are: the nature of the industry structure, the diversity of service product offerings and markets served, and the complexity of sales for the organisational structure from where the subjects were drawn from.

Besides these arguments, there is one unique reason why the present study reveals no significant relationship between salesmanship skills and salesperson

performance. The very healthy financial position of TM Berhad (TM Annual Report, 2005) has allowed the organisation to embark on multi-pronged promotional strategies and initiatives to generate product awareness. MCMC's Industry Performance Report 2005 reports that TM Berhad spent RM148.3 million (USD42.37 million) on advertising alone in 2005, making them the top advertiser among all the telecommunications companies. It is a well-known fact that extensive promotional activities generate better awareness and customers that are well-informed about the offered product lines underpin the generation of more sales to the organisation (McDaniel *et al.*, 2006). Apparently, the promotional initiatives facilitate easier pre-sale, sale and post-sale efforts required by salespersons. Therefore, with regards to this rationale, it suggests that the need to have high salesmanship skills becomes less crucial to the organisation in this context since salesmanship skills provide less influence on improving salesperson performance.

### **Relationship between Marketing Skills and Salesperson Performance**

Market knowledge reflects a salesperson's knowledge about the industry in general (e.g., competition, trends). An extensive knowledge base is important for salespersons, because it allows them to cope with complex market environments. It is expected that salespersons with commendable marketing skills will produce good performance (Leigh and McGraw, 1989; Sujan *et al.*, 1988b). Nonetheless, findings from the present study do not support Ahearne and Schillewaert's (2000) finding that marketing skills have a significant relationship with salesperson performance.

With regards to the reasons for an insignificant relationship between marketing skills and salesperson performance, similar arguments given to insignificant findings of salesmanship and technical skills are also applicable here. Where industry structure (monopolistic industry): extensive promotional activities through advertising, trade shows etc., and complexity of sales organisational structure with clear distribution and demarcation of works between sales and marketing personnel; and, where the subjects were drawn from have a significant impact in disapproving the hypothesis that marketing skills influence salesperson performance. It may also be that TM Berhad is strongly sales oriented, and the relative decency of marketing's potential ascendancy and superiority may be perceived negatively by sales supervisory personnel.

### **The Moderating Effect of Organisational Commitment**

The present study examined the potential moderating roles of organisational commitment on the relationship between sales skills dimensions, namely, interpersonal, salesmanship, technical and marketing skills, and salesperson performance. It was hypothesised that the influence of sales skills dimensions

on salesperson performance is higher when organisational commitment is high. Although the idea of interaction makes sense conceptually, contrary to the hypothesis, the expected moderating role of organisational commitment on the independent variables could not be empirically substantiated. However, organisational commitment has a significant independent impact on salesperson performance ( $\beta = .25, p < .01, \Delta R^2 = .05$ ). This finding is consistent with the findings of Zabid *et al.*, (2003); Benkhoff (1997); Ward and Davis (1995); and Brett *et al.*, (1995) who concluded that organisational commitment and sales performance were positively correlated.

The insignificant effect in the present study of the organisational commitment as a moderator may be because organisational commitment is not considered a critical element for job performance, and has been taken for granted by either the salespersons or the organisation under study. The salespersons feeling of needing to remain in the organisation was high due to limited opportunity costs for the salespersons in alternative employment. This is not unreasonable as the opportunities for job-changing are few and the choice of alternative careers may be limited. This could be due to inconvenience in work dislocation or immobility of the salespersons. One reason for this is that many Malaysians, at an early age of their career, have long-term financial and family commitments, leaving them with many constraints that prevent switching job or organisation. These impediments result in the subjects remaining in a single organisation for a longer period or for their whole working life. Consequently, it naturally results that the longer an employee is attached to an organisation, the greater the potential to have an emotional commitment to remain in the organisation (Zabid *et al.*, 2003). Nevertheless, this phenomenon would not necessarily provide an interaction effect of organisational commitment with sales skills dimensions in enhancing salesperson performance.

Though the present study does not support the moderating effect of organisational commitment in enhancing the relationship strength between sales skills dimensions and salesperson performance, the finding suggests that organisational commitment has a direct effect on salesperson performance. The result of this finding implies that sales organisations may perhaps use loyalty to the organisation as a means to achieve higher salesperson performance.

## CONCLUSION

Despite some unusual findings, the results from this study suggest that salespersons that possess excellent interpersonal skills can significantly boost sales performance. Additionally, this study shows that in a monopolistic business environment, interpersonal skills play a pivotal role in salesperson performance. Furthermore, to underpin sales, every interpersonal contact must have an objective and whenever possible every effort must be made to avoid creating win-lose transactions. Recognising the importance of interpersonal skills, sales organisations should give

emphasis and effort to develop improved methods of training and development to enhance their salespersons' interpersonal skills. Training and development initiatives have been proven by many previous empirical studies to lead to improved interpersonal skills of salespersons (Hunt and Baruch, 2003). By understanding the sales person performance, the organization can create various programmes to improve sales performance. Additionally, sales organisations should now treat interpersonal skills as a critical skill component in salesperson recruitment and selection exercises, and also in formulating rewards and recognition policies. Another managerial implication of the present study is that salesperson management systems can significantly affect salesperson performance. The results intimate that employees' organisational commitment can enhance individual job performance. Given the importance of salesperson performance in the sales organisation context, where organisations depend upon individual salespersons contributions for meeting sales objectives as is the case here, management should make every effort to promote organisational commitment. Moreover, the present study also shows that sales organisations may use loyalty to an organisation as a means to achieve higher salesperson performance. The findings thus offer potential avenues for further academic research into sales and managerial practice. Future studies may serve to highlight and enhance the need for salespersons to either have, or need to develop interpersonal skills as the key determinant of effective selling.

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