Development And Significance Of Social Networks In Sales Organizations For Enhancing Salesperson Performance

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	Abstract
	In recent years, there has been a noticeable shift in the study of salesperson performance, with a growing recognition of the significance of intra organizational dynamics alongside the traditional focus on customer relationships. This evolving perspective acknowledges the intricate web of connections and interactions within sales organizations that contribute to overall sales effectiveness (e.g., Royals and Humphries 2007). By delving into the realm of intra organizational relationships, researchers are uncovering valuable insights into the factors that drive salesperson performance beyond external customer-facing activities (e.g., Brown and Peterson 1994; Szymanski 1988). The study referenced here presents a nuanced exploration of the impact of intra organizational relationships on salesperson performance, drawing on data collected from a substantial sample of 286 sales professionals in Pune (Balkundi and Harrison 2006; Wasserman and Faust 1994). Through the lens of social network analysis, the researchers scrutinized the intricate patterns of interaction and influence within the organizational context. Their findings shed light on the pivotal role played by two distinct dimensions of social network characteristics: relational centrality and positional centrality. Relational centrality, (e.g., Plouffe and Gr´egoire 2011), which reflects the prominence of salespeople within the social fabric of the organization based on their relationships and connections, emerged as a significant determinant of salesperson performance. The study further illuminates the role of political skill—an individual's ability to effectively navigate organizational dynamics and influence others—in shaping relational centrality (Hughes, Le Bon, and Malshe 2012; Plouffe and Barclay 2007) . Surprisingly, however, the researchers observed that while political skill positively correlated with relational centrality, it did not exert a similar influence on positional centrality within the social network.

Keywords: Social Connections, Sales Outcomes, Adeptness in Organizational Politics, and Intra Organizational Culture, Sales Person's Performance. |

Introduction:

In today's competitive business landscape, the role of social networks within sales organizations has garnered increasing attention due to their profound impact on salesperson performance and overall organizational

success (Ryals and Humphries 2007). This paper delves into the intricate development and significance of social networks, exploring how they serve as vital conduits for information exchange, collaboration, and relationship-building among sales professionals. Through an extensive examination (Ferris et al. 2007) of literature and empirical research, we dissect the evolution of social networks within sales contexts, shedding light on their transformative potential in driving sales effectiveness and fostering enduring customer connections (e.g., Ahearne et al. 2012; Gonzalez et al. 2014).

This nuanced distinction underscores the complexity inherent in organizational social networks and challenges conventional assumptions regarding the uniformity of network centrality (Wei, Chiang, and Wu 2012). It suggests that different types of centrality may reflect distinct underlying mechanisms and dynamics within the organizational context, necessitating a more nuanced understanding of intra organizational relationships (Flaherty et al. 2012).

The implications of these findings extend beyond the realm of academic inquiry, offering valuable insights for both practitioners and researchers in the field of sales management. For managers, the study underscores the importance of fostering robust intra organizational relationships and recognizing the multifaceted nature of salesperson performance dynamics (Ferris et al. 2007; Liu et al. 2007). By leveraging insights from social network analysis and understanding the interplay between political skill and relational centrality, managers can design interventions and initiatives to enhance collaboration, communication, and cohesion within their sales teams.

Moreover, the study opens up promising avenues for future research, prompting inquiries into the underlying mechanisms driving intra organizational relationships and their impact on sales outcomes. By delving deeper into the intricacies of social network dynamics and exploring the role of individual attributes such as political skill, researchers can further enrich our understanding of salesperson performance in today's complex organizational landscape (Wei, Chiang, and Wu 2012).

Literature Review:

In essence, the study represents a significant contribution to the evolving discourse on sales performance research, highlighting the indispensable role of intra organizational relationships and offering valuable insights that have practical implications for sales management and organizational effectiveness.

By elucidating the mechanisms through which social networks operate within sales organizations, this study uncovers their multifaceted benefits, including heightened sales productivity, enhanced knowledge sharing, and improved adaptability to market dynamics. Furthermore, we explore the critical role of social networks in nurturing a conducive environment for innovation, learning, and professional development among sales teams, thereby bolstering their collective capabilities and resilience in navigating complex business challenges.

Drawing on insights from various theoretical perspectives and practical case studies, this paper offers actionable recommendations and strategies for harnessing the power of social networks to optimize salesperson performance and organizational outcomes. From cultivating strong interpersonal ties and fostering a culture of trust and collaboration to leveraging digital platforms and emerging technologies, we delineate a comprehensive framework for maximizing the potential of social networks within sales organizations.

By embracing the evolving landscape of social connectivity and capitalizing on the synergies inherent in social networks, firms can unlock new avenues for growth, differentiation, and sustainable competitive advantage. As such, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of the pivotal role played by social networks in shaping the dynamics of contemporary sales environments, empowering organizations to thrive amidst evolving market demands and stakeholder expectations.

The study of social networks within organizational contexts draws upon various theoretical frameworks to understand the dynamics of interpersonal relationships, influence patterns, and their implications for individual and organizational outcomes. One of the foundational theories in this domain is Social Network Theory, which posits that relationships among individuals form networks characterized by ties, nodes, and structural properties. According to this theory, individuals within networks exchange resources, information, and support, influencing one another's behaviour and outcomes.

Within the realm of sales performance research, Social Network Theory provides a lens through which to examine the development and significance of social networks among sales professionals. By analysing the structure and dynamics of social connections within sales organizations, researchers can uncover patterns of communication, collaboration, and influence that impact salesperson performance and organizational effectiveness.

Another relevant theoretical perspective is the concept of Network Centralities, which encompasses various measures used to assess the relative importance and influence of individuals within a social network. Centrality

metrics such as degree centrality, between ness centrality, and closeness centrality help identify key actors and brokers who wield significant influence over information flow and decision-making processes within the network. Understanding different forms of centrality provides insights into how individuals position themselves within the organizational hierarchy and leverage their connections to achieve strategic objectives.

In addition to social network theories, research in sales performance also draws upon insights from organizational behaviour and psychology, particularly the concept of Political Skill. Political Skill refers to individuals' ability to effectively navigate organizational politics, build coalitions, and influence others to achieve desired outcomes. Sales professionals with high levels of political skill are adept at forging alliances, gaining access to valuable resources, and navigating power dynamics within the organization, ultimately enhancing their performance and success.

The interplay between social networks, network centralities, political skill, and intra organizational relationships forms the theoretical underpinning of research examining the impact of social dynamics on salesperson performance. By integrating insights from these theoretical perspectives, researchers can elucidate the mechanisms through which social connections, power structures, and political dynamics shape sales outcomes within organizational contexts.

In summary, theoretical frameworks such as Social Network Theory, Network Centralities, and Political Skill provide a conceptual foundation for understanding the complex interplay between social dynamics and sales performance in modern organizations. By applying these theories to empirical research, scholars aim to uncover actionable insights that can inform managerial practices, enhance salesperson effectiveness, and drive organizational success in dynamic and competitive market environments.

Theoretical Background and Hypothesis Development:

FIGURE 1
Contrasting Relational and Positional Network Centralities
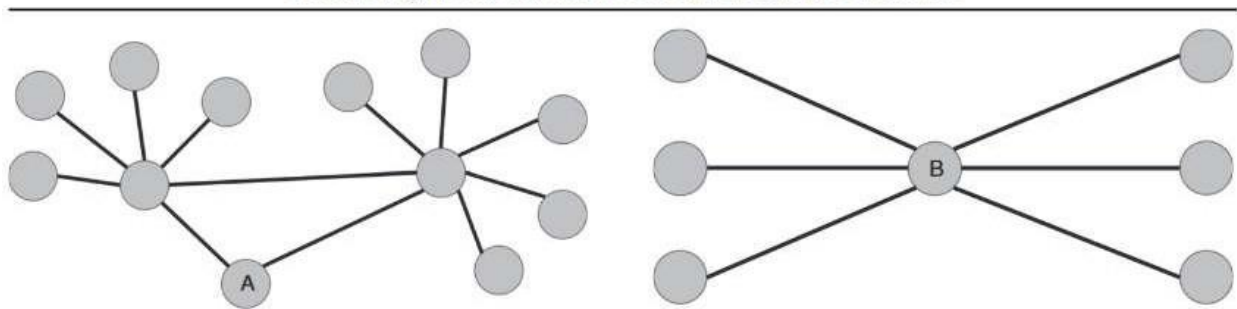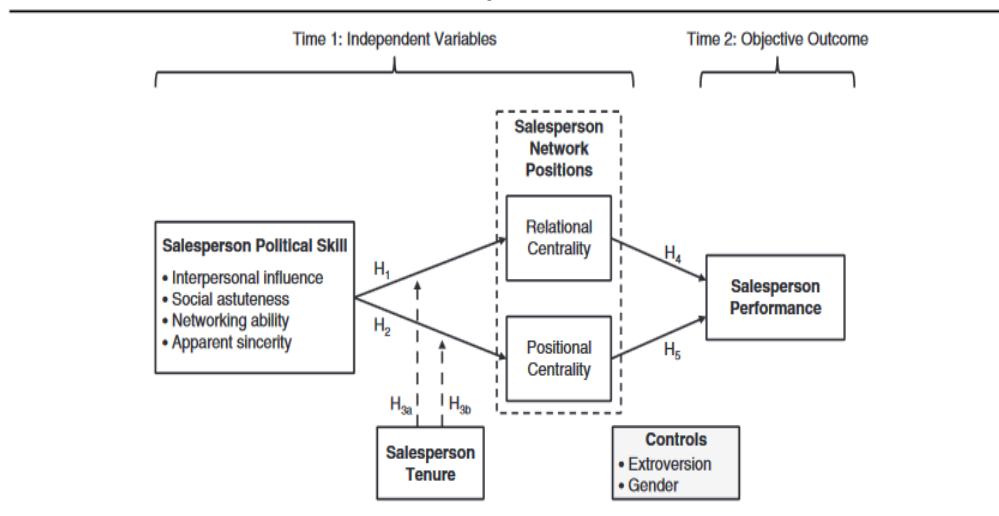
Relational Centrality:
1. Salesperson A is linked to individuals who themselves have extensive networks.
2. Their connections wield significant influence.
3. Salesperson A benefits from "reputational resources" acquired through associations with influential individuals.

Positional Centrality:
1. Salesperson B is connected to individuals who lack connections with others.
2. Their connections remain isolated, except through Salesperson B.
3. Salesperson B possesses "informational resources" obtained from access to unique information.

Political Skill and Relational Network Centrality: Salespeople with high political skill possess the ability to identify and leverage power dynamics within their organization. Their adeptness in adjusting behavior to different contexts fosters trust and confidence among colleagues (Ferris et al., 2007, 2012). Relational centrality, derived from connections to influential individuals, enhances a salesperson's reputation. Politically skilled individuals excel at identifying and nurturing relationships with influential figures due to their social perceptiveness and networking abilities. Therefore, politically skilled salespeople are expected to secure positions of relational centrality.

FIGURE 2
Conceptual Model

H1: Political skill positively influences relational centrality.

Political Skill and Positional Network Centrality: Politically skilled salespeople recognize structural holes within the organizational network and possess the ability to bridge them effectively. Structural holes represent untapped sources of unique information (Burt, 2000, 2001). Politically skilled individuals can bridge these gaps, fostering relationships among disconnected groups. Hence, they are more likely to secure positions of positional centrality by bridging links between unconnected parties.

H2: Political skill positively influences positional centrality.

Political Skill × Organizational Tenure Interaction: Organizational tenure is recognized to impact various organizational outcomes, including in-role performance (Ng and Feldman, 2010). We propose that tenure, combined with political skill, facilitates the development of advantageous network ties over time. Rather than treating tenure as a control variable, we explore its dynamic interaction with political skill in acquiring favorable social network positions.

Developing social ties, even for politically skilled salespeople, takes time (Brass and Krackhardt, 2012). While political skill facilitates the development of relational and positional network centralities, these relationships do not materialize instantly. Salespeople need time to initiate contacts and cultivate meaningful relationships (Dwyer, Schurr, and Oh, 1987; M¨oller and Halinen, 1999). Therefore, we anticipate that a salesperson's tenure within an organization strengthens the association between political skill and relational and positional network centralities.

H3a: There is a positive and significant interaction between political skill and organizational tenure on relational centrality, whereby as organizational tenure increases, the influence of political skill on relational centrality intensifies.

H3b: There is a positive and significant interaction between organizational tenure and political skill on positional centrality, such that as organizational tenure increases, the impact of political skill on positional centrality amplifies.

Relational and positional centrality significantly impact sales performance. Salespeople with extensive and active networks wield considerable influence (Brass and Krackhardt, 1999). The informal social network represents a source of power tied to reputational or informational resources (Brass and Krackhardt, 1999). Relational centrality, indicating influence through social ties, signifies reputation within the network (Bonacich and Lloyd, 2004). Connections to influential individuals signal both influence and resource access (Cialdini, 1989). Highly connected individuals are presumed to possess expertise beyond average salespeople and are easily identifiable in sales organizations (Mehra et al., 2006; French and Raven, 1959). Salespeople often rely on expertise and cooperation from colleagues to meet customer needs.

Well-connected contacts are expected to possess higher levels of expertise that salespeople can leverage to better meet customer needs and enhance performance. Additionally, having a prominent connection within an

organization enhances a person's own reputation as a high performer, influencing others' actions and willingness to share expertise (Mehra et al., 2006). Ties to influential individuals increase a salesperson's ability to effect change within the organization.

Moreover, connections to influential others increase perceived self-efficacy through feedback (Bandura, 1982). Perceived self-efficacy, along with required job skills, is crucial for completing challenging tasks such as selling (Bandura, 1982, 1986). Salespeople learn and develop self-efficacy by modeling others' behavior, particularly if they are connected to influential figures, which enhances their ability to perform tasks such as prospecting and closing sales.

H4: Relational centrality positively impacts sales performance.

Interactions with a variety of external influences lead to positive outcomes in organizational settings, facilitating the cross-fertilization of ideas (Perry-Smith and Shalley, 2003). Positional centrality indicates individual opportunities for cross-fertilization of ideas, techniques, and problem-solving approaches within sales contexts. Bridging structural holes in the organization grants salespeople access to unique knowledge resources (Burt, 2000). Bridging salespeople can combine unique information into creative solutions, delivering greater value to customers and boosting sales performance.

H5: Positional centrality positively influences sales performance.

In summary, we propose that salespeople's performance is influenced by their ability to navigate organizational dynamics, cultivate relationships that position them in key social network roles, and connect with influential individuals, enabling them to leverage the resources inherent in their network positions to enhance job performance (Ferris et al., 2007, 2012). Furthermore, we acknowledge that achieving these objectives requires time and persistence, highlighting the gradual process through which salespeople acquire and translate internal resources into tangible performance outcomes.

While prior research has established that political skill predicts performance across various organizational roles (Munyon et al., 2015), there is a gap in explicitly examining the performance of politically skilled sales professionals. In the following section, we outline the methodology for testing the proposed hypotheses and subsequently present and discuss the findings.

Method:

Sample and Data Collection Procedure

Data were gathered from the outside sales force of a India-based company specializing in selling high-end items directly to consumers (business-to-consumer). The sales context is analogous to a sales force marketing customized home technology packages (e.g., security systems, home automation) to owners of upscale homes in major metropolitan areas. Salespeople at this company are compensated solely through commissions based on individual sales performance. Due to the customized nature of each sale, strong intra organizational networks are essential for ensuring accurate and timely implementation of customer solutions. Thus, salespeople endeavour to cultivate valuable relationships within the organization to exchange information and enhance their reputation by connecting with influential peers. We anticipate that intra organizational networks play a pivotal role in driving sales performance.

The survey was introduced at the company's annual sales conference, where all employees were informed about the project's development and purpose. Additionally, they had the opportunity to meet a member of the research team and witnessed the full support of the company's top leadership for the project. Working within a single firm offers several advantages for this project. Notably, individual nodes can significantly impact overall network measures. Given that networks comprise interaction patterns, defining the network boundary is crucial for distinguishing relevant nodes from irrelevant ones. For network analysis, operating within a single firm establishes a clear network boundary (e.g., Ahearne, Lam, and Kraus, 2014), mitigating errors in boundary specification that could affect network measure calculations.

Secondly, operating within a single company facilitates collaboration with top leaders to ensure full employee engagement in the survey. A robust response rate is crucial for obtaining an accurate representation of the network, making high employee engagement imperative (Wasserman and Faust, 1994). Thirdly, focusing our study on one company allows us to control for various external factors such as organizational culture, company size, industry competitiveness, and others, which could confound results in studies involving multiple firms.

The participating company had a total of 397 salespeople, all of whom were requested to complete the survey. Surveys were returned from 286 salespeople (40% female). Response rates for social network analysis are calculated in nodal and relational terms. Relational response rates consider that, for non-directed networks like

the one in this study, information regarding social ties can be provided by either one or both members of the dyad (Knoke and Yang, 2008). Specifically, for a complete, non-directed network of N actors with no alter reports from M actors, the response rate for a particular relation is calculated as follows:

= 100% when M = 0 or M = 1

= 1 - C2M/ C2N ×{100% when 1 < M < N

= 0% when M = N

The formula for calculating the number of possible ties in a sales network, denoted as C2N, is derived from the combination formula where N! represents the factorial of N, indicating the product of positive integers from 1 to N. In the context of an undirected network, the count of possible ties is determined by the expression [n · (n - 1)], as outlined by Wasserman and Faust (1994), resulting in 157,212 ties. With 286 responses, which account for 72% of the total salespeople, we can explain 92% of dyads, as observed by Knoke and Yang (2008). Consequently, our dataset reflects a comprehensive network within the primary sales organization. Additionally, the network encompasses relationships not confined to sales force members; notably, the survey identified 253 nonsalespeople, almost equal in number to responding salespeople, constituting 763 unique dyads in the social network. Thus, our network analysis provides a robust insight into intraorganizational relationships, encompassing both sales and nonsales domains.

Social capital theory, as elucidated by Lin (1986, 1999), originates from classical capital theory (Lin 1999), wherein capital refers to the allocation of resources in a market context with anticipated returns. Social capital, however, emphasizes the investment in social resources within the social sphere and the subsequent benefits derived from such investments in addressing practical needs. This theoretical framework establishes a connection between the broader structural attributes of social networks and the individual Behaviour within them, illustrating the intricate dynamics between macro-level structures and micro-level interactions. According to social capital theory, the social framework generates value by facilitating access to resources like knowledge and authority, which are ingrained within the intricate network of social connections.

TABLE 1

Political Skill Items

	Abbreviated Political Skill Inventory (Significant at p < .001)	Loading on Political Skill Dimension
SA	I am particularly good at sensing the motivations and hidden agendas	
SA	of others.	.903
SA	I understand people very well.	.794
II	I have good intuition or "savvy" about how to present myself to others.	.759
II	I am able to communicate easily and effectively with others.	.879
II	I am good at getting people to like me.	.875
NA	It is easy for me to develop a good rapport with most people.	.865
NA	I am good at building relationships with influential people at work.	.875
NA	I am good at using my connections and networking to make things happen at work.	.849
AS	I spend a lot of time at work developing connections with others.	.809
AS	I try to show a genuine interest in other people.	.831
AS	It is important that people believe I am sincere in what I say and do.	.823
	When communicating with others, I try to be genuine in what I say and do.	

Notes: We adapted this table from Ferris et al. (2005). SA = social astuteness; II = interpersonal influence; NA = networking ability; AS = apparent sincerity. All items were measured using a seven-point Likert-type scale (1 = "strongly disagree," and 7 = "strongly agree").

In our study, relational centrality is defined and quantified through eigenvector centrality. Eigenvector centrality provides an objective evaluation of an individual's centrality within a social network, taking into consideration the connectivity of their contacts. Unlike degree centrality, which simply counts direct connections, eigenvector centrality acknowledges that not all connections hold equal importance; connections with high connectivity themselves exert greater influence. Our aim is to gauge organizational status based on the status of a salesperson's connections, and thus, this adjusted measure offers a more precise reflection of an individual's status in the social network (e.g., Treadway et al., 2013). The formula for eigenvector centrality (CE(i)) is computed for all i belonging to set I as follows:

$CE(i) = l1 \sum j=1 nmijxj$,

- where: *i* represents an individual actor in the network,
- *CE(i)* denotes the eigenvector centrality measure for individual *i*,
- *xj* signifies the degree centrality of actor *j*, defined as the number of edges incident on node *j*,
- *mij* equals 1 if actor *i* is linked to actor *j* in the network, otherwise 0,
- *l* stands for a constant representing the number of actors *j* linked to actor *i*.

Positional Centrality Calculation:

In our research, positional centrality is operationalized using betweenness centrality. It assesses the extent to which a salesperson acts as a bridge, connecting otherwise unlinked nodes along geodesic paths. Thus, betweenness centrality serves as a measure of a salesperson's access to unique informational resources embedded within the network (Brass & Halgin, 2012). The formula for individual-level betweenness centrality (CB (i)) is computed for all *i* belonging to set *I* as follows:

$CB(i) = gjk1 \sum fj< kg:i \in j, kgijk$, where:

- represents an individual actor in the network,
- *gjk* denotes the total number of geodesic paths between individuals *j* and *k* in the network matrix *A*,
- *gijk* represents the total number of geodesic paths between individuals *j* and *k* in network matrix *A* that involve individual *i*,
- *CB(i)* signifies the betweenness centrality measure for individual *i*.

The research employs various methods to examine the hypothesized model. Initially, social network analysis, facilitated by UCINET, is utilized to compute relational and positional centralities for the participants. UCINET, developed by Borgatti, Everett, and Freeman (2002), is a prominent social network analysis tool extensively employed across disciplines. Subsequently, partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM) is applied to evaluate the structural model, as outlined by Ringle, Wende, and Will (2005).

PLS-SEM was chosen for several reasons. Firstly, PLS focuses on predictive analysis, aiming to maximize the variance of endogenous variables explained by the exogenous ones (Hair et al., 2014), which aligns with the study objectives. Secondly, PLS does not necessitate meeting the assumptions of normality for data distributions, making it suitable for skewed or leptokurtic network data distributions. Thirdly, PLS is well-suited for estimating complex models, including hierarchical component models, enabling the examination of the hierarchical, second-order reflective-formative construct. Lastly, PLS is preferred for testing interactions as it does not inflate measurement error (Chin, Marcolin, and Newsted, 2003).

Data Analysis:

It's crucial to note that while results from covariance-based structural equation modeling (CB-SEM) procedures (e.g., AMOS, LISREL) and PLS-SEM analysis typically do not significantly differ, PLS-SEM results are considered good proxies for CB-SEM results, offering conservative estimates. Both PLS-SEM and CB-SEM have their limitations and strengths, with PLS-SEM being particularly suitable for non-normal data and models containing reflective-formative higher-order constructs. The choice of PLS-SEM methodology is supported by the nature of the data and the model's complexity. Concerns over data normality and higher-order constructs often justify the use of PLS in prominent marketing journals (e.g., Ernst, Hoyer, and Rubsaamen, 2010; Hennig-Thurau, Houston, and Heitjans, 2009

Correlations, Means, Standard Deviations, Construct Reliabilities, R-Squares, and Square Roots of AVE

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
1. Political skill	.608										
2.Relational centrality	.127	-									
3.Positional centrality	.099	.325									
4. Sales performance	.040	.418	.271	-							
5. Tenure	-.127	.281	-.087	.330							
6. Extroversion	.418	-.033	.148	-.026	-.226	.921					
7. Gender	.133	-.235	.071	-.244	-.456	.179	-				
8. PS-Apparent sincerity	.607	.041	.083	-.121	-.176	.116	.247	.821			
9. PS-Interpersonal influence	.794	.095	.032	.068	-.038	.430	-.044	.283	.839		
10. PS-Networking ability	.787	.173	.131	.125	-.154	.354	.125	.342	.494	.863	
11. PS-Social astuteness	.703	.034	.037	-.008	-.008	265	.100	.289	.457	.344	.826
M	5.925	5.351	.524	79.026	9.241	5.327	1.401	6.430	6.112	5.380	5.779
SD	.567	4.554	1.044	51.674	8.994	1.476	.491	.613	.677	1.051	.791
CR	.873					.918		.861	.877	.898	.865
R2	-	.153	.034	.266							

*p < .05.

**p < .01.

***p < .001.

Notes: One-tailed tests of significance. n.s. = not significant.

Notes: We adapted this table from Ferris et al. (2005). SA = social astuteness; II = interpersonal influence; NA = networking ability; AS = apparent sincerity. All items were measured using a seven-point Likert-type scale (1 = "strongly disagree," and 7 = "strongly agree").

$CB(i)=gjk1\sum fj<k(fj,i,j,i\square=k)gjkgi$

$CB\ i$ represents the betweenness centrality of node i.

Results:

The results from the structural model testing confirm the proposed model and reveal some unexpected findings. Table 3 displays the direct effects of political skill on relational and positional centrality (H1 and H2, respectively), the interaction effects of tenure on the political skill-social network relationship (H3a-b), and the direct effects of relational (H4) and positional (H5) centrality on performance. The specific findings are discussed below.

Both relational (H4) and positional (H5) centrality have direct and positive impacts on performance (b = .262, p = .000; b = .209, p = .000, respectively). While the direct effect of political skill on positional centrality is no significant (p > .05; H2 is not supported), the results uphold the hypothesis that heightened political skill contributes to a stronger relational network position (H1 is supported). Therefore, political skill significantly and directly influences salesperson relational centrality (b = .189, p = .002). As hypothesized, organizational tenure moderates the relationship between political skill and relational centrality (b = .169, p = .027; H3a); however, contrary to expectations, it does not moderate the political skill-positional centrality relationship (p > .05; H3b is not supported).

In the final phase of analysis, we investigate the mediating role of social network centralities in the political skill-salesperson performance relationship. This mediation is examined using the method proposed by Preacher and Hayes (2004), which utilizes bootstrapping techniques, making no assumptions about variable distribution (Hair et al., 2014). Furthermore, the Preacher and Hayes method offers greater statistical power compared to the Sobel test typically used for testing the significance of indirect effects (Hair et al., 2014).

Since the political skill to positional centrality path coefficient was not significant, suggesting no mediation through positional centrality, we exclusively tested the mediation effects on relational centrality. The analysis encompassed paths from the interaction to the proposed mediator, the mediator to the dependent variable, and the independent variable to the dependent variable in the mediator's presence. To conclude the mediation analysis, we assessed the remaining path—the path from the independent variable to the dependent variable in the mediator's absence. This path was significant (b = .113, p < .05, one-tailed) when the mediator was excluded from the model. While full mediation does not necessarily require this condition, the presence of a direct effect simplifies the interpretation of the mediation process (Hair et al., 2014).

TABLE 3
Total Effects on Performance

	Political Skill	Relational Centrality	Positional Centrality	Sales Performance
Political skill (PS)		.189**	n.s.	.058*
PS × Tenure		.169*	n.s.	.062*
Relational centrality				.262***
Positional centrality				.209***
Tenure		.217***	n.s.	.284***
Extroversion		n.s.	.117*	n.s.
Gender		−.154**	n.s.	-.128*
PS—Apparent sincerity	.272***	.051**	n.s.	.016*
PS—Interpersonal influence	.375***	.071**	n.s.	.022*
PS—Networking ability	.400***	.075**	n.s.	.023*
PS—Social astuteness	.316***	.059**	n.s.	.018*

*$p < .05$.
**$p < .01$.
***$p < .001$.
Notes: One-tailed tests of significance. n.s. = not significant.

The mediation accounts for more than 20% but less than 80% of the variance, indicating a partial and significant mediation.

Furthermore, control variables demonstrate significant effects on performance and salesperson network characteristics. Specifically, both gender and tenure exhibit significant effects on relational position (b = -.154, p = .002; b = .217, p = .001, respectively), while tenure also directly influences performance (b = .237, p = .000). Notably, extroversion emerges as the sole significant predictor of positional centrality (b = .117, p = .011). In the subsequent section, we delve into the implications of these results and contemplate the insights they offer.

Discussion:

This study applies social network analysis to a distinctive dataset, merging survey responses regarding salespeople's network positions with objective sales performance data. It aims to bridge two crucial gaps in our current comprehension of the determinants of salesperson performance. Firstly, it investigates whether salespeople's organizational social networks can predict objective sales performance. Secondly, it explores a potential antecedent of salespeople's intra organizational social network development, specifically delving into the role of salespeople's political skill. Each of these pivotal issues is discussed in greater detail below.

What Relationship Exists Between Intra organizational Social Networks and Salesperson Performance?

The study acknowledges that most literature on salesperson performance in marketing primarily focuses on customer-directed behaviours. Like Plouffe and Barclay (2007), it recognizes that such research has only been able to account for 10%-20% of the variance in sales performance, highlighting the potential to enhance explanatory power by examining intra organizational factors.

Results indicate that salespeople's intra organizational networks, characterized by relational and positional network centrality, significantly influence sales performance. Furthermore, the modelling of these network variables explains 26.6% of the variance in sales performance, enriching and extending prior models cantered on customer-directed salesperson behaviours. These findings align with conceptual propositions suggesting that relationships and behaviours within a salesperson's organization might be even more critical in determining performance than those outside the organization (e.g., Royals and Humphries, 2007). This study offers empirical support to this discourse. Given the decades-long emphasis on customer-directed behaviours in academic literature, it underscores the potential oversight of the significant role played by intrafirm factors in the process.

Antecedents of Intra Organizational Social Network Development:

Considering the significance of both positional and relational network centralities in driving actual salesperson performance, it's vital to explore how these network types are cultivated. As anticipated, salespeople's political skill exhibits a positive association with relational network centrality. However, unexpectedly, political skill displays no correlation with positional centrality. This suggests that while these salesperson skills and behaviors impact relational centrality, they do not influence positional centrality. Such findings underscore the crucial notion that different social network metrics represent distinct antecedents and may offer unique benefits and effects on performance. Furthermore, the unexpected outcomes regarding positional centrality highlight the limited understanding of the precursors of network positions and the process by which various types of social networks evolve.

Delving deeper, it's noteworthy that extroversion emerges as the sole significant predictor of positional centrality. In hindsight, this finding holds some logical coherence. Political skill embodies a deliberate, strategic set of competencies and behaviors, enabling salespeople with high levels of political skill to engage in actions facilitating effective identification and connection with high-status individuals. Hence, politically skilled salespeople recognize that establishing connections with high-status individuals represents a sound strategy for enhancing intra organizational relationships and performance. However, the awareness that bridging disconnected parties within the organization can also enhance social capital and, consequently, sales performance may not be as evident to them.

In contrast, behaviors driven by high extroversion are not strategic or deliberate actions pursued for extrinsic rewards. Rather, they stem from intrinsic motivation, as highly extroverted individuals derive personal satisfaction from engaging socially with others. Consequently, highly extroverted individuals tend to build connections because of who they are, not solely for professional advantage. Consequently, they may inadvertently find themselves in desirable bridging network positions due to their intrinsic motivation to cultivate relationships with various individuals encountered in their work, irrespective of their perceived status or strategic desirability.

This prompts questions regarding whether other skill- or behavior-based variables could elucidate variance in positional centrality. If political skill fails to account for positional centrality, what factors do? These questions are discussed further in the "Limitations and Future Research Directions" subsection.

Limitations and Future Research Directions:

Fourth and finally, while our research underscores the significance of political skill as a potent catalyst for enhancing relational network centrality among salespeople, it's crucial for further inquiry to explore additional domains where political skill could yield substantial benefits. One particularly pertinent area deserving attention is the realm of interdepartmental interfaces. Future studies ought to investigate how political skill contributes to effectiveness across various departmental boundaries, encompassing interfaces between marketing and departments such as research and development, finance, among others (e.g., Ernst, Hoyer, and Rubsaamen 2010; Hughes, Le Bon, and Malshe 2012). Understanding the role of political skill in navigating these interfaces can illuminate its broader implications beyond intra organizational networks and shed light on its potential to foster collaboration and synergy across diverse organizational functions.Fourth and finally, while our study underscores the potent influence of political skill on relational network centrality among salespeople, future research should expand its focus to consider additional domains where political skill may wield significant impact. An area of burgeoning interest lies in exploring interdepartmental interfaces within organizations. Subsequent studies could delve into how political acumen enhances effectiveness across diverse departmental boundaries, including those between marketing, research and development, finance, and beyond (e.g., Ernst, Hoyer, and Rubsaamen, 2010; Hughes, Le Bon, and Malshe, 2012). By investigating the role of political skill in facilitating seamless interactions between different organizational units, researchers can illuminate strategies for fostering collaboration and synergy, ultimately enriching overall organizational performance."

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