The impact of training, mentoring and coaching on personal learning in the sales environment

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Abstract

Training, mentoring, and coaching are all tools used to manage and enhance the performance of the sales force. However, little is known about the interplay between these learning tools and the extent to which a salesperson applies the knowledge, skills, and abilities acquired in training on the job, defined as learning transfer. Using a sample of frontline salespeople across various industries, this study investigates the significance of training, mentoring, and coaching in the sales learning transfer. The findings of the study bolster knowledge of the tools that increase learning and promote transfer, both of which can ultimately improve sales performance.

Keywords: sales, training, mentoring, coaching, personal learning

Introduction

The recent tenor in the business environment has immensely changed the role of salespeople, as relationship building and consultative selling have become more significant in the current climate than the feature- advantage-benefit approach of the past (Lassk, Ingram, Kraus & Di Mascio, 2012). With organizations increasingly operating in markets characterized by rapid changes, it is vital that salespeople's skills are kept up-to-date in order to survive the pressures of a dynamic business environment. To keep up with such changes, the most successful organizations are reported to spend more on developing their employees (Kraiger, 2003; Noe, 2010). That said, the costs associated with the development of a single salesperson are alarming and can exceed $100,000 over the course of a given career (Dubinsky, 1996; Johnston & Marshall, 2006). Hence, having employees participate in developmental activities which are justified from a cost perspective has increasingly become of interest to sales organizations (Chonko, Jones, Roberts & Dubinsky, 2002). Although improvements in sales outcomes have been linked to such activities, there is limited insight into the sales knowledge tools that are most appropriate in developing and cultivating specific learning outcomes over time.

Foundational research in learning and knowledge transfer provides insights on which training approaches are appropriate for salespeople. While current reviews of learning have

found conflicting results on the factors that lead to learning success, salient exceptions appear within the professional sales context. Managerial support (e.g., coaching) and peer support (e.g., mentoring) have consistently been suggested as positively influencing sales outcomes (Baldwin & Ford, 1988; Blume, Ford, Baldwin & Huang, 2010). Using the Social Learning Theory as the theoretical framework (Bandura & McClelland, 1977), our research investigates the effect mentoring, coaching, and sales training as methods for improving salesperson learning. According to Social Learning Theory, a person's behavior, environment, and personal qualities have reciprocal effects on each other. As a result, there is increased emphasis on determining an approach for delivering information in a manner that improves salesperson proficiency (Attia & Honeycutt, 2012; Chonko, Jones, Robert & Dubinsky, 2002).

The current study makes contributions to the literature and practice by taking a process perspective to explore if the learning outcomes that drive performance in a business-to-business sales context are being met. The purpose of this study is to evaluate the effect sales knowledge tools (e.g., mentoring, coaching) have beyond that of sales training as mechanisms for improving post-training skills application. We thus set forth a framework for organizations to evaluate whether the intended benefits of their instructional strategy and knowledge tools are being realized by way of measureable outcomes. Such measurable outcomes provide guidance to sales managers on effective approaches to achieving continuous improvement in sales force outcomes. Overall, this research contributes to extant literature and practice by offering empirical insights as to how ongoing coaching and mentoring effect the application of workplace learning, thereby increasing the probability that the benefits of training will extend to performance outcomes that can be felt at the organizational level.

We conceptualize and test relationships among sales training, sales mentoring, sales coaching and personal learning. First, the study will assess the effects of internal, external and on the job training on the transfer of learning in the sales environment. Second, the study will review internal and external mentoring as it relates to salesperson learning. Third, we will evaluate the relationship between coaching and the learning transfer process. Our findings will demonstrate that salesperson training and mentoring both have positive effects on salesperson personal learning. The theoretical and managerial implications of the results are also discussed.

Construct Overview
Personal learning is defined as acquired knowledge, skills, or competencies which lead to the growth and development of an individual's interpersonal competencies (Lankau & Scandura, 2002). Personal learning involves an individual gaining insight into their own strengths and weaknesses, an awareness of identity and values, as well as an understanding of their developmental needs, reactions, and behaviour patterns (Higgins & Kram, 2001; Kram, 1996). The underlying premise of personal learning is that individuals learn automatically through actively working with others. As mutuality and interdependence become more common within boundary-less careers (Arthur & Rousseau 1996), the boundary of workplace teaching and learning is less clear (Hall, 1996; Liu & Fu, 2011). The implication is that individuals in today's modern sales environment should develop their skills through continuous learning experiences which may span multiple positions and possibly multiple organizations (Liu & Fu, 2011). Individuals with elevated levels of personal learning have the ability to continuously learn from others regardless of their rank or position (Lankau & Scandura, 2007).

Personal learning is divided into two dimensions: relational job learning and personal skill development (Lankau & Scandura, 2002). Relational job learning is defined, in this study, as the increased understanding about the interdependence or connectedness of one's job to others. In other words, learning in the context of how an individual's work is related to the work of others. The second type of personal learning is labeled personal skill development and relates to the employee's development of interpersonal skills that make for a better working environment (Lankau & Scandura, 2002). Employees develop personal skills through interacting with others, active listening, and solving problems in social contexts. Training is the systematic acquisition of knowledge, skills and abilities (KSAs) that lead to improved performance (Grossman & Salas, 2011). Scholars have explored multiple variables including pre-training, in-training, and post-training climate as well as various environmental factors including varying instructional techniques and learning principles (e.g., Alvarez *et al.*, 2004), self-management, relapse prevention strategies, and goal setting techniques (e.g., Brown, 2005; Gist *et al.*, 1990).

As organizations work to offer programs that will lead to a greater degree of sales force competence and enhanced sales performance, technology and cultural differences become more apparent. The emergence of networking technology has changed how information can be shared and how training knowledge can be delivered (Tanner *et al.,* 2005). For example, firms are now challenged to move toward more specialized training platforms (Cron *et al.*, 2005). This is evidenced as traditional methods of delivery, such as classroom lectures and training seminars, are being replaced with more high-tech instructional designs, such as computer simulations and distance learning modules (Zhang *et al.,* 2004).

In this study, we delineate the multitude of delivery factors identified in extant training literature utilizing a bundle approach to categorizing the learning delivery method in general terms (Perry-Smith & Blum, 2000). A bundle encompasses a broad, higher-level effect than what can be determined by focusing on distinct characteristics (Becker & Gerhart, 1996). We explore training outcomes referencing them in terms of the most common sales training delivery methods (Roman, Ruiz, & Munuera, 2002). In doing so, we conceptualize training delivery groupings similar to the description in Roman et al.'s (2002) review of the literature. These groupings include internal training (training activities run by company trainers), external training (training activities run by providers outside the organization) (Churchill *et al,*. 1997), and on-the-job training (training that occurs while fulfilling actual job duties) (Chang, 2003). We investigate internal training, external training, and on-the-job training as knowledge (attention) tools that influence the transfer of learning.

Mentoring is defined as an interpersonal exchange between a senior experienced person (mentor) and a less experienced junior person (protégé) in which the mentor provides support, direction, and feedback regarding career plans and personal development (Haggard *et al.*, 2011). Mentoring relationships involve frequent interaction between the mentor and the protégé with a goal of enhancing the protégé's competencies and aiding in his/her career advancement (Haggard *et al.*, 2011). These relationships have been investigated from various aspects, including the role of mentors (Gentry, 2013; Noe, 1988), benefits of mentor relationships (Donner & Wheeler, 2001; Scandura & Lankau, 2002), functions of mentors,

(Brashear *et al.,* 2006, Gentry, 2013), results of mentor relationships (Hartmann *et al.,* 2013), and negative aspects of mentor relationships (Scandura, 1998).

The sales environment offers a unique domain to evaluate the effect of mentoring on learning transfer, as salespeople work with less oversight (Aldrich & Herker, 1977) and endure more physical, social, and psychological separation than many other professions (Dubinsky *et al.,* 1986). Salespeople also report multiple issues with sales training programs (Honeycutt *et al.*, 1994; Lassk *et al.*, 2012), with a lack of follow-up and a lack of organizational support for applying the new skills as their chief concerns. Despite these apprehensions, sales research has been limited in the examination of salesperson-mentor relationships (Rollins *et al.*, 2014).

The mentoring literature provides evidence of the need to examine boundary conditions to better understand mentoring's impact on protégés (Hartmann *et al.*, 2013). Following the current literature, our study focuses on the extent to which differences in the degree of formality (i.e., formal/informal) and proximity of the mentoring relationship (i.e., internal/external) influence learning in the sales environment. While closely related, mentoring and coaching are conceptualized uniquely (Richardson, 2009). Coaching is defined as a process of improving performance by focusing on correcting problems with the work being done (Fournies, 1987). Researchers have also defined coaching as a process of empowering employees to exceed established performance levels (Burdett, 1998). Coaching refers to the practice of teaching an employee about the rules, goals, and politics of the organization (Richardson, 2009).

Despite the ambiguity on the exact distinctions between the coaching concept and counseling, mentoring, or teaching, the general sentiment is that mentoring is relational (i.e., involving a developmental relationship between parties), whereas coaching is functional (Richardson, 2009) and exists due to the organization's need to maintain performance standards. Moen and Allgood (2009) assert a mentor may coach, but a coach is not necessarily the employee's mentor (Parsloe *et al.*, 2001). As such, many companies expect their managers to coach their subordinates as a required part of their job (Richardson, 2009). Coaching helps the learner personalize the teaching material and make links from theory to practice or from abstract examples and study material to real-world challenges the individual learner might face (Hill, Bahniuk, Dobos, & Rouner, 1989). This study will consider coaching as a function of the salesperson's direct supervisor in determining the influence these activities have on learning transfer in the sales environment. In this study, we will examine the influence of the direct supervisor's coaching and feedback on the salesperson's personal learning. We will evaluate the relationship between these factors and their effect on the learning transfer process.

Effective sales training is a valuable factor contributing to organizational growth (Chonko *et al.,* 2002). However, there is a lack of definitive empirical evidence that sales training efforts and activities lead to desired or expected results (Attia *et al.,* 2005). Some sales managers have suggested that one learns selling by doing, not by training. Similarly, many salespeople favour learning from customer interaction as opposed to classroom training and believe traditional training programs are not always the most effective use of their time (Honeycutt *et al.,* 1994). Despite the ongoing debate, it seems most research finds some degree of training is beneficial to salespeople (Briggs, Jaramillo & Weeks, 2012). Thus:

H₁a *Internal training has a positive effect on personal learning.*

H₁b *External training has a positive effect on personal learning.*

H₁c *On-the-job training has a positive effect on personal learning.*

The presence of a mentor and the execution of mentoring functions have been found as antecedents of personal learning (Lankau & Scandura, 2002) and mentor relationships are effective in helping facilitate the personal learning of protégés. Two aspects of mentoring relationships are focused upon. First, the focus is on internal compared to external mentors, as support provided by internal versus external mentors can be quite different. Internal mentors are conceptualized to provide greater organizational resources, protection, exposure, access to challenging assignments, and role modeling than external mentors (Hartmann *et al.,* 2013). Social Learning Theory holds that inactive learning occurs as a result of direct interaction with the mentor and helps the salesperson develop favorable patterns of behavior (Bandura & McClelland, 1977). Through these interactions, the protégé observes the communication and response of the mentor and mimics these attitudes and behaviors in similar work settings, thereby personal skill development increases.
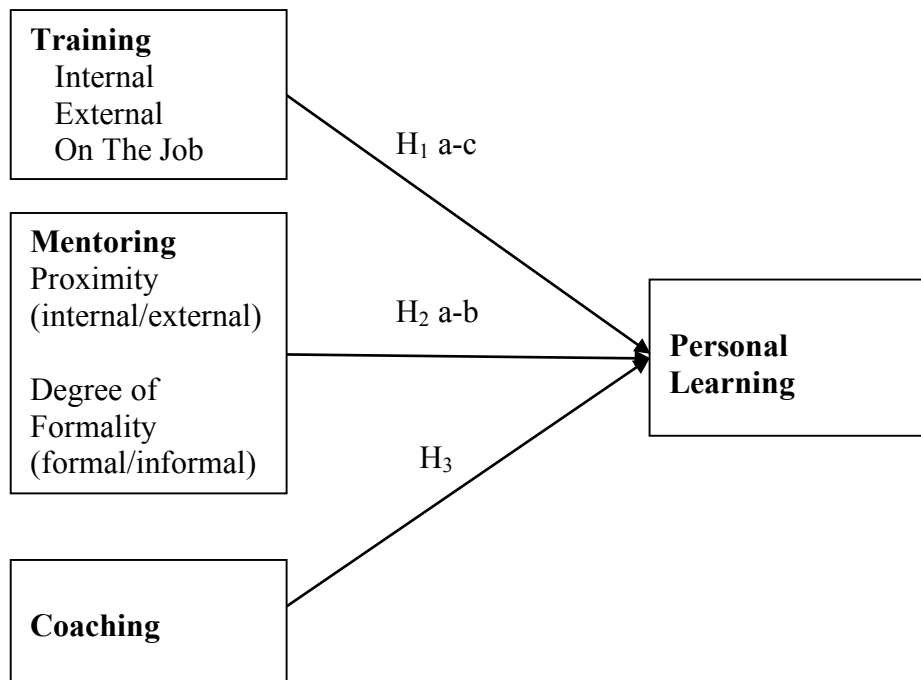
H₂a *Salespeople with internal mentors exhibit higher levels of personal learning than salespeople with external mentors.*

Second, formal compared to informal mentor relationships are focused upon. Extant mentoring literature indicates protégés prefer informal mentoring relationships; however, mixed results exist regarding outcomes of formal versus informal mentoring (Scandura & Williams, 2002). Nonetheless, compared to informal mentoring, formal mentoring has been associated with positive benefits as well, including low levels of role ambiguity, lower role conflict, diminished perceptions of environmental uncertainty, and less frequent turnover intentions (Ragins et al. 2000).

H₂b *Salespeople with informal mentors exhibit higher levels of personal learning than salespeople with formal mentors.*

Coaching is an important resource for personal learning in the sales field and is becoming the management model for sales managers (Matthews, 2004). The American Society for Training and Development (2011) suggests by having a conversation to provide feedback, establish expectations, and reinforce positive behaviour, supervisors may encourage improved performance. It identifies coaching as one of the areas of expertise deemed critical for workplace learning and performance. The relationship between salespeople and their managers represents untapped potential for this type of social learning (Kram & Cherniss, 2001) whereby ongoing development may occur. From that perspective, the current research builds on the idea that supervisors help create an environment that allows for increased levels of learning transfer (see figure 1).

H₃ *Coaching has a positive effect on personal learning.*

Figure layout:

Training
Internal
External
On The Job

Mentoring
Proximity
(internal/external)

Degree of
Formality
(formal/informal)

Coaching

H_1 a-c

H_2 a-b

H_3

Personal Learning

Figure 1 – The model

Methodology

Measures.

Nonmetric categorical scales were developed and used to capture the respondents' training, coaching, and mentor status. Subjects were asked to identify their last training experience as either internal (majority provided by organizational trainers), external (majority provided by trainers outside of the organization), or on-the-job training (majority of the training derived by completing job tasks). To gather information regarding coaching, the following definition was given: "A coach is responsible for helping an employee learn the tasks and skills needed to perform successfully in the job. A coach would work for the same organization and could be a manager, supervisor or other individual whose function is to work hands-on with you toward achieving sales goals." For mentor status, respondents were asked if they had been mentored before and given a definition of a mentor as a more experienced person who helps a less experienced person learn to navigate their work environment. They then were asked to consider the mentor with whom they had the most significant interaction and classify them as an internal mentor (employed by the same organization) or external mentor (employed outside

of the organization); they were also asked to state if the mentor was formal (assigned by the organization) or informal (spontaneously developed relationship). Learning was measured using a 12-item scale developed by Lankau and Scandura (2002) to measure the two dimensions: relational job learning and personal skill development. For this scale, respondents were instructed to: "Answer the following questions with regard to your learning experiences." Responses were anchored from 1 *strongly disagree* to 11 *strongly agree.* Scale items can be found in Appendix A.

Sample*.*

Data for this study was collected in the U.S. using an online access panel company. The questionnaire was made accessible to panel participants previously self-identifying as working within sales. A total of 878 people entered and consented to participate in the survey. Salespeople not identifying as business-to-business salespersons (n=615) were filtered out. 'Listwise deletion', which removes respondents from the analysis on the basis of one or more missing values, was utilized leaving 177 respondents for an effective usable response rate of 20.02%. The sample was split almost evenly between male (49.2%) and female (50.8%) respondents. Seventy five percent of the respondents had a college education, a median of 13.1 years in a sales position, and the average age was 39, which is comparable to the representation reported by other sales research (Briggs *et al.,* 2011). The mean monthly income (without bonuses) was just under $5,000 with approximately 30% of the salary being attributed to commission. We controlled for respondents' demographic variables including gender, age and industry because these variables could influence individual learning and outcomes in an organization (Lankau & Scandura, 2002).

Respondents had to attend some form of sales training at least one to two times per year. For this training, 89 respondents identified it as internal, 34 respondents identified it as external, and 54 respondents identified it as on-the-job. Fifty-six respondents indicated that they have a sales coach. As far as mentoring, 46 respondents currently have a mentor, while 81 had a mentor in the past. Fifty respondents indicated that they have never had a mentor. Of the respondents that have been or are currently being mentored, 98 have an internal mentor and 29 have an external mentor. Of those with internal mentors, 76 have informal mentors and 22 have a formal mentoring relationship. Table 1 shows the sample composition by demographic characteristics.

Demographic	Category	Frequency	%
Gender			
	Male	87	49.2
	Female	90	50.8
Age			
	Under 21	4	2
	21-30	50	28
	31-40	44	24.9
	41-50	36	20.3
	51-60	35	19.8
	Over 60	8	4.5
Highest Level of Education			
	Some High School	1	.6

	High School Graduate	43	24.3
	Undergraduate Degree	104	58.8
	Master's Degree	25	14.1
	Doctoral Degree	4	2.3
Years of employment in sales			
	Less than 1 year	4	2.3
	1 to 3 years	30	17
	More than 3 years to 5 years	28	16
	More than 5 years to 10 years	37	21
	More than 10 years to 15 years	18	10.2
	More than 15 years to 20 years	14	7.9
	More than 20 years to 25 years	19	10.7
	More than 25 years to 30 years	12	6.8
	More than 30 years	15	8.5
Years in current role			
	Less than 1 year	21	11.9
	1 to 3 years	65	37
	More than 3 years to 5 years	29	16
	More than 5 years to 10 years	28	16
	More than 10 years to 15 years	11	6.2
	More than 15 years to 20 years	13	7.3
	More than 20 years to 25 years	3	1.7
	More than 25 years to 30 years	3	1.7
	More than 30 years	3	1.7
Years with current employer			
	Less than 1 year	15	8.5
	1 to 3 years	56	31.6
	More than 3 years to 5 years	39	22.0
	More than 5 years to 10 years	37	20.9
	More than 10 years to 15 years	14	7.9
	More than 15 years to 20 years	8	4.5
	More than 20 years to 25 years	2	1.1
	More than 25 years to 30 years	3	1.7
	More than 30 years	3	1.7
Industry			
	Manufacturing	19	10.7
	Distribution	67	37.9
	Services	76	42.9
	Other	18	8.5

Table 1- Sample composition by demographic characteristics

Analysis and Approach.

Validity and reliability assessments of the personal learning construct indicated the two factors of the personal learning construct (personal skill development and relational job learning) had an interconstruct correlation of .941. Thus, evidence of discriminant validity regarding personal learning having unique facets is not provided. Further, EFA results provide support that the full 12-item scale loading on a single factor. While not the expected

result, this lack of discriminant validity is consistent with some previous personal learning research (e.g., Kwan & Mao 2011; Liu & Fu 2011; Liao et al. 2010).

To address the lack of validity between the two facets, steps were taken to assess personal learning from a global viewpoint. The first step involved selecting items from both facets to form the personal learning construct. Specifically, the six strongest indicator items from the personal skill development and relational job learning scales were selected. Like the full 12-item scale, these six items loaded on a single factor when conducting EFA. Also, the threshold for internal reliability (> 0.70) was met (Hair et al., 2010) with a coefficient alpha of .85 for the six-item scale. Then correlations between the six-item and full item scales were compared. The correlation between the two scales was .956. The high correlation provides evidence that information is not being lost from the reduction of items (Podsakoff & MacKenzie, 1994; Rutherford *et al.,* 2011). Overall, evidence is provided that the selected items are providing a complete and consistent assessment of the personal learning construct compared to the full scale items.

Next, attention is turned to potential operational meaning being lost by combining the two facets into one construct. To determine if information was lost, correlations between personal learning (six items), personal skill development, and relational job learning were examined. The reduced personal learning scale correlated highly with the two facets of personal learning. Specifically, personal learning and personal skill development had a correlation of .961. Personal learning and relational job learning had a correlation of .847. Given the high correlations obtained, it was determined that operational information would not be lost by examining a single construct (personal learning) versus the two facets (personal skill development and relational job learning).

Appendix B is included to provide regression results using the full personal learning scale despite lack of discriminant validity. To test the majority of the hypotheses, regression analysis was conducted using SPSS Version 20. However, to test H2b, a t-test was conducted due to the inclusion of the internal mentor variable in the regression equation.

Results

The results of the main and control effects of the regression are provided in Table 2. First, the study included only control variables in the regression equation. Results did not find any significant impact of the controls on personal learning. Attention now turns to the hypotheses. Results for first set of hypotheses (H1a-c) indicate partial support for the impact of training on personal learning. A positive relationship was found between external training and personal learning as hypothesized in H1b (β=.457; p<.05), and on-the-job training as hypothesized in H1c (β=.493; p<.05). The relationship between internal training and personal learning as proposed by H1a was not supported (*p*>.05).

Results for the second set of hypotheses indicate partial support. Results for H2a showed salespeople with internal mentors exhibited higher levels of personal learning than salespeople with external mentors, as there was no significance between external mentoring and personal learning (*p*>.05). Results provide support for H2a (β=.227, *p*<.05). However,

the analysis for H2b revealed no significant differences between those with informal (mean = 8.78) and formal (mean = 8.69) mentoring ($p>.05$). The third hypothesis examined the impact of coaching on personal learning.

Results for H3 reveal there is not a significant relationship between the constructs ($p>.05$). Results therefore fail to support H3. The overall model provided an R^2 of 0.112 when predicting personal learning.

	Control		Knowledge Tools with Control	
	B	t-value	β	t-value
Construct				
Gender	.013	.158	-.029	-.354
Under 21	.041	.518	-.013	-.165
31-40	.071	.761	.119	1.287
41-50	.086	.922	.137	1.458
51-60	.013	.140	.012	.129
Over 60	.093	1.121	.129	1.580
Manufacturing	.017	.203	.054	.654
Distribution	.002	.029	.034	.389
Other Industry	.095	1.149	.096	1.182
Internal Training			.382	1.443
External Training			.457	2.184*
On-the-Job Training			.493	1.997*
Internal Mentor			.227	2.521*
External Mentor			.028	.300
Coaching			.012	.140
R^2	.023		.112	

*Significant at $p<.05$

Table 2 – Regression results: personal learning predicted by training, mentoring and coaching

Discussion

The results of our analysis showed that contrary to what might be held as conventional wisdom, company-sponsored internal training programs are perhaps not always the best option for organizations looking to increase transfer of sales learning. Instead, the results suggest external training and on-the-job training may be a rewarding approach for business-to-business salespeople as well. Primary findings associated with past studies on the topic of sales training point to the need for salespeople to continually update their skills (Briggs *et al.,* 2012). Being trained only once or periodically is not enough for a salesperson to remain current with their skills. Thus, another potential explanation for the significant relationship between external training and personal learning is that often, external training is offered as supplemental skill development.

We found strong support for the positive effect of sales mentoring (H2). Our results identify internal mentoring as having a significant association with personal learning, whereas, external mentoring (H2a) did not, which is consistent with the findings of other sales researchers (e.g., Hartmann *et al.,* 2013). Interactions with internal mentors give protégés a chance to observe and mimic the work behavior of their mentors in similar work settings. By observing or imitating the mentor's behaviour in varying job scenarios, the protégé is able to recognize how his or her job is associated with others thereby increasing their personal learning. Additional findings from the study regarding mentoring confirm both informal and formal mentoring have positive effects on personal learning. That is, irrespective of the type of relationship, the results indicate both are effective at increasing personal learning. Although prior research suggests informal mentoring relationships are preferred by protégés (Ragins *et al.*, 2000), the finding that both platforms are significant is consistent with the mixed results having been reported in the extant literature regarding the outcomes of formal versus informal mentoring (Scandura & Williams, 2002). Thus, as Ragins et al. (2000) argued, it is too simplistic to assume that all informal mentoring relationships are more beneficial than formal mentoring relationships due to the advantage of spontaneity.

Our findings advance the extant literature by providing insight into how the internal/external source of the mentor (e.g., Chao, 1998) and the formal/informal classification (Ragins *et al.,* 2000; Sandura & Williams, 2002) affects the dynamics of the relationship and ensuing learning transference. We offer empirical support that work outcomes are influenced by the proximity (i.e., internal) and the degree of formality of the mentoring relationship. Given the sparse availability of information on sales mentoring relationships, the findings in this study are helpful to those seeking to understand how a salesperson's learning outcomes may relate to their mentoring status.

Several researchers have proposed possible outcomes of coaching (Carter, Hirsch & Ashton, 2002; Theeboom, *et al.*, 2014). Coaching was considered in this study as the on-going direction and instruction provided to a salesperson by a superior for the purpose of increasing their sales competence. Contrary to the prediction in H3, there was not a significant relationship between the presence of a coach and personal learning. Researchers offer support for this finding, as some have reported doubts concerning the actual benefits of coaching (Theeboom, *et al.*, 2014). In fact, only a few studies have been published on what actually constitutes effective coaching and very little research has provided empirical support for the benefit of coaching relationships (Richardson, 2009).

Sales coaching represents an untapped area of potential for social and emotional learning (Kram & Cherniss, 2001) whereby ongoing development may occur. Despite the recent attention the subject has received, coaching seemingly remains an under-researched area that should be addressed by scholars in the future. Several studies have stressed the importance of the role of supervisors/managers in increasing learning (Chonko *et al*, 2002). Employees are more likely to be engaged in their work and committed to learning their jobs when they perceive they are receiving developmental support from their managers (Rich, LePine, & Crawford, 2010). Conversely, the lack of managerial/supervisory support may be a reason why the benefits of coaching are not being realized.

Managerial Implications

The results of this study indicate that sales organizations should explore additional learning channels other than those routinely used for salesperson development. Using a combination approach may provide the salesperson with the opportunity to acquire the skills they need in a more efficient and effective manner, which can translate into a competitive advantage. It appears there may be a synergistic approach, with external tools being coupled with internal mentoring, leading to learning outcomes which can translate into a competitive advantage. Empirical results regarding the impact of mentoring learned from this research reinforce the need for organizations to support mentoring as a strategy to allow for this self-management process.

Motivating employees to learn by providing opportunities for them to learn is likely to yield organization-wide advantages. Yet, time is extremely valuable for salespeople. Companies seeking to provide learning opportunities should take into account the time needed to complete the tasks. The goal should be to provide the most effective ways to train overall as opposed to just the most cost effective ways to train. Although external trainers often appear more costly compared to internal training, the effectiveness of such training could make it a worthwhile investment. Our data suggests that organizations should encourage learning through less direct channels which extend beyond traditional classroom training methods, such as behaviour management (e.g., mentoring programs, outside training opportunities) (Taylor *et al.,* 2009).

Given the limited research on sales mentoring relationships, the findings in this study are helpful to those seeking to understand how a salesperson's behavioural and/or attitudinal outcomes relate to their mentoring status. Our findings advance sales management practice by offering empirical support that learning outcomes are influenced by the proximity of the mentoring relationship coupled with external learning opportunities. It appears that leveraging expertise where appropriate leads to continuous learning. The outside experts likely combine expertise in content with skill in learning transfer. The mentor provides insights likely available only through intimate knowledge of the organization. The combination seems likely to enhance the learning outcomes. Although coaching and mentoring are sometimes considered as synonymous, there can be considerable differences between them. Salespeople who have experienced the two roles generally agree they are not the same. It is therefore worthwhile for organizations to advance techniques in order to distinguish the benefits of each and incorporate methods to utilize both.

Limitations and Future Research

The findings of this study are subject to several limitations. First, the study relied on self-reported measures; as such self-report bias is sometimes problematic (Rutherford 2016). Also, as a cross-sectional study, the data were collected at a single point in time which is an additional limitation. Given that the sales environment and salesperson's behaviour may change over time, how they would respond to the survey items may also change over time. Thus, a more robust approach involving longitudinal data collection over a period of time may be more representative of an enduring prospective of the variables being observed. Emanating from these limitations, however, are myriad future research opportunities. In addition, the

personal learning scale did not show discriminant validity between the two facets, thus, limiting the ability of this study to look at specific facets of personal learning.

The findings from this study are beneficial not only for mentoring researchers but also for learning transfer scholars and those looking to explore more comprehensive methods to evaluate sales training. Training scholars have long suggested moving toward more testable models of evaluating learning (e.g., Holton, 1996). As such, we developed and tested a model which incorporated environmental factors along with Tannenbaum et al.'s (1991) views on training evaluation. We encourage future researchers to continue to explore other key variables of training (i.e., quality, functions, and duration) in efforts to establish a more comprehensive model of evaluation. Previous studies have shown how personality traits influence learning outcomes (e.g., Komarraju *et al.,* 2011). Understanding a salesperson's personality traits may help managers create an environment that is more conducive to learning. With this knowledge, organizations can improve learning strategies and offer resources that support increased personal learning, which may potentially impact overall sales success. Thus, a review of personality traits should be considered an avenue for future researchers to advance this stream of literature. It is suggested that researchers continue to investigate specific functions, including career functions (exposure, visibility coaching, sponsorship, protection, providing challenging assignments) and psychosocial functions (role modeling, acceptance, confirmation, counseling, friendship), provided in both types of mentoring relationships. Furthermore, despite the recent attention the subject of sales coaching has received, coaching seemingly remains an under-researched area in academia that should be addressed by scholars.

Finally, additional research could examine the personal learning scale to further determine if indeed the personal learning scale is multi-faceted as conceptualized or if the scale is actually a one-dimensional scale as the operational aspects of our study suggest. As a minimum, additional validity tests should be conducted within a sales context. At most, the opportunity for either additional scale refinement work and/or the creation of another salesperson personal learning scale presents itself.

Conclusion

Training costs are estimated at close to $130 billion annually (Patel, 2010). Organizational leaders, however, generally agree that there is seldom any real change when employees return to work (Ricks *et al.,* 2008). For decades, researchers have worked to develop a general theory of learning transfer. Although Kirkpatrick's (1976) evaluation typology is the most commonly used, scholars continue to work toward identifying more inclusive frameworks (Attia *et al.,* 2005; Van Buren & Erskine, 2002). There is no doubt that organizations are interested in understanding where to invest their training dollars in order to yield the best return. Determining the most effective and cost efficient method to encourage the sales force to transfer learning for improved results continues to plague organizational leaders. Thus, scholars interested in understanding additional factors that foster increased learning transfer would find this study particularly helpful.

Our work contributes to existing literature regarding the effect trainees' characteristics, such as motivation to learn and the learning environment (Holton, 1996), have on learning

transfer results. The results of this study indicate external training and internal mentoring could be particularly useful in addressing low rates of learning transfer. These results should also motivate scholars to investigate this subject in the future in order to validate the findings and to expand our knowledge of how training, mentoring, and coaching influences learning in the sales environment.

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Appendix A. Item description summary.

Sales Knowledge Tools
1. Approximately how many times in a given year are you required to attend some form of sales training?_____

2. For the training identified in Question #1 would you describe the training as Internal (majority provided by organizational trainers) or External (majority provided by trainers outside of the organization) or on-the-job training (majority training derived by completing job tasks)?

     _Internal Training   _External Training   _On-the-job Training _Other

3. Do you have a sales coach? (a coach is responsible for helping an employee learn the tasks and skills needed to perform successfully in the job. A coach would work for the same organization and could be a manager, supervisor or other individual whose function is to work hands-on with you toward achieving sales goals).__Yes   __No

4. Have you been mentored at any time in your career? (A mentor is a more experienced person who helps a less experienced person learn to navigate their work environment.)

     __Past but not currently   __Currently   __Never mentored

5. If you have been mentored, would you consider the mentor with whom you have/had the most significant interaction as an Internal mentor (employed by the same organization) or External mentor (employed outside of the organization)? Formal (assigned by the organization) or Informal (spontaneously developed relationship)?

   __Internal Mentor   __Informal Mentor __External Mentor __Formal Mentor

Personal Learning (12 items)
   1. I have gained insight into how another department functions. (removed)
   2. I have increased my knowledge about the organization as a whole. (removed)
   3. I have learned about others' perceptions about me or my job.
   4. I have increased my understanding of issues and problems outside my job.
   5. I better understand how my job or department affects others.
   6. I have a better sense of organizational politics.
   7. I have learned how to communicate effectively with others.
   8. I have improved my listening skills. (removed)
   9. I have developed new ideas about how to perform my job. (removed)
   10. I have become more sensitive to others' feelings and attitudes. (removed)
   11. I have gained new skills.
   12. I have expanded the way I think about things. (removed)

Appendix B. Regression results using the two facets of Personal Learning (personal skill development and relational job learning)

	Control		Knowledge Tools with Control	
	β	t-value	β	t-value
Construct				
Gender	.007	.087	-.037	-.457
Under 21	-.006	-.079	-.059	-.734
31-40	.115	1.236	.166	1.786
41-50	.080	.855	.127	1.348
51-60	.039	.408	.040	.424
Over 60	.113	1.357	.148	1.820
Manufacturing	.026	.313	.065	.781
Distribution	.000	-.002	.029	.331
Other Industry	.067	.804	.068	.836
Internal Training			.388	1.467
External Training			.462	2.207*
On-the-Job Training			.503	2.038*
Internal Mentor			.226	2.517*
External Mentor			.046	.495
Coaching			.009	.104
R^2	.023		.113	

*Significant at $p<.05$