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Corporate Influencers in Business-to-Business Sales: A Grounded Theory Study

Short Paper

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Abstract

The importance of professional social media usage by business-to-business (B2B) sales employees has been well acknowledged, but the understanding of corporate influencers in B2B marketing a more thorough investigation. Literature has primarily focused on salespeople's social media behavior, performance outcomes and effects on customer relations. However, little is known about salespeople's motivation to act as corporate influencers, their actual activities on social media when they enact this role, as well as opportunities and challenges of salespeople who purposefully take on a corporate influencer role. We use a grounded theory approach to investigate this phenomenon. Based on in-depth interviews with experts from various B2B industries, we identify intrinsic and extrinsic motivational factors that drive LinkedIn usage as well as opportunities and challenges of corporate influencer activities. These findings extend previous corporate influencer research. Moreover, we offer actionable practical implications.

Keywords: Corporate Influencer, Social Media, B2B, Salespeople, Grounded Theory

Introduction

“There are [756 million social media users worldwide and 16 million in the DACH region]. That's [...] a huge number of social media users. They are somehow all potential customers somewhere. [...] They are simply there. You just have to activate them somehow.” [#T1]

Social media has become one of the most important technologies of our time for firms to receive and share information (Appel et al. 2020). A recent study with 777 Business-to-Business (B2B) firms from the DACH (Germany (D), Austria (A), Switzerland (CH)) region shows that the use of the professional social network LinkedIn in sales has increased by 61 % from 2019 to 2020 (Schmitz and Huckemann 2021). In addition, 61.6 % of respondents agree that sales organizations will use LinkedIn and other platforms more intensively in the future to interact with and find new customers (Schmitz and Huckemann 2021). B2B sales organizations can build a meaningful presence (Bill, Feurer, and Klarman 2020) on professional social networking sites (Mukerjee 2014) by encouraging their employees to act as corporate influencers – employed individuals who actively share content in line with their professional background (Nestler,

Hoffmann, and Poeppelbuss 2021). Corporate influencer activities are particularly recommended for sales organizations because of their fundamental boundary-spanning role within their firm at the front line with customers (Guesalaga 2016). Interacting, engaging, and establishing buyer-seller-relationships via LinkedIn help sales organizations in their communication with customers (Agnihotri et al. 2012), improve identification of qualified customers, and continue to build deeper customer relationships (Bill, Feurer, and Klarmann 2020; Rodriguez, Peterson, and Krishnan 2012). Therefore, social media usage affects the whole sales organization.

Although there is strong managerial awareness of the relevance of corporate influencers in a B2B context, research on this topic remains scarce. Existing studies give a first understanding of B2B salespeople who employ social media (Levin, Hansen, and Laverie 2012; Schultz, Schwepker, and Good 2012b), the effects on performance outcomes (Agnihotri et al. 2012) and customer relationships (Bill, Feurer, and Klarmann 2020; Ogilvie et al. 2018). Despite this emerging body of research, we know little about salespeople who purposefully enact the role of a corporate influencer for their firms on LinkedIn. This led us to examine the following research questions (RQ):

RQ1: What motivates B2B salespeople to use LinkedIn?

RQ2: How do B2B salespeople enact the role of a corporate influencer on LinkedIn?

RQ3: What are key opportunities and challenges of using LinkedIn for B2B sales organizations?

To enlighten our research questions, we conducted a study with 27 expert interviews following the grounded theory methodology (Corbin and Strauss 2008; Gioia, Corley, and Hamilton 2013). Grounded theory is based on the premise that researchers are able to obtain data from interviewees with experience in a specific area where theory is not fully developed and the research topic is relatively new (Goulding 2002). This is the case when looking closely at the phenomenon of corporate influencers in B2B sales.

Our data analysis resulted in categories and dimensions revealing that employees' LinkedIn usage not only depends on intrinsic motivation but can also be triggered extrinsically. Furthermore, details on LinkedIn usage and key opportunities and challenges resulting from corporate influencer activities are revealed. By answering our research questions with a deliberate focus on LinkedIn, we advance the nascent research stream on corporate influencers in B2B marketing.

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows: First, we provide a research background of corporate influencers and B2B salespeople's social media usage, highlighting key gaps and research issues. Next, we present the methodology and findings of the study. Then, we explain the key contributions to theory and point out applicable managerial implications. We close this paper with a discussion of limitations and steps for future research.

Research Background

As social media becomes more relevant, customers are drastically changing both, their social media usage behaviors and the way they use different sources. Rather than passively receiving information, they now actively seek information when needed through social media (Batra and Keller 2016). They 'follow' companies and 'connect' with their employees via LinkedIn (Agnihotri et al. 2016). As customers increasingly engage in social networks, suppliers need to adjust their social media usage to meet their customers, which is why B2B sales is becoming more digital continuously (Victoria Kramer and Manfred Krafft). Employees are now encouraged to be active on professional social networks and create content (Huotari et al. 2015). Just recently, Nestler, Hoffmann and Poeppelbuss (2021) suggested a definition for the notion of the corporate influencer. According to this definition, a corporate influencer is any employee who is constantly active on professional social networks like LinkedIn as part of the employer's B2B marketing activities. Due to the boundary-spanning role that salespeople have within their company by being at the front line with customers, social networks have the potential to facilitate especially the interaction between salespeople and customers (Guesalaga 2016). This suggests that corporate influencer activities should be pursued in the sales context. The shift toward LinkedIn is also motivated due to the COVID-19 pandemic, during which digital sales has become inevitable, because lockdowns and travel restrictions didn't allow in-person interaction (Mora Cortez and Johnston 2020) As a consequence, B2B salespeople are increasingly using LinkedIn and other digital information and communication technologies for their selling activities (Kramer and Krafft 2022).The usage of social media by B2B salespeople has

already been studied in a few cases. Existing studies present a profile of B2B salespeople who employ social media (Schultz, Schwepker, and Good 2012b), give an understanding on salespeople's social media participation (e.g., Levin, Hansen, and Laverie 2012), and present a framework on how social media can help salespeople to perform service behaviors leading to value creation (Agnihotri et al. 2012). In addition, the effect of salespeople's social media usage on customer relationships have been investigated (e.g., Agnihotri et al. 2016; Bill, Feurer, and Klarmann 2020; Ogilvie et al. 2018). Existing research shows that salespeople can gain advantages through social media (Schultz, Schwepker, and Good 2012a), especially when generating leads and maintaining customer relationships (Giamanco and Gregoire 2012; Lacka and Chong 2016; Rodriguez, Peterson, and Krishnan 2012). Nevertheless, recent research also shows that there is uncertainty regarding the ways of using social media (Järvinen et al. 2012), the fit between social media usage and the overall sales strategy (Agnihotri et al. 2016), as well as the effects of less face-to-face contact on customer relations. Practitioners describe the interaction via social media as impersonal (Michaelidou, Siamagka, and Christodoulides 2011). Otherwise, less face-to-face contact is not perceived as negative per se (Marshall et al. 2012). Generally, measuring the effect of social media marketing activities on corporate key performance indicators (KPIs) is considered to be difficult (Järvinen et al. 2012).

While these studies provide some insights on the social media use of salespeople, little is known about salespeople who purposefully take on the role of a corporate influencer for their firms on LinkedIn. We contribute to this research field by exploring corporate influencer's motivation to use LinkedIn, how they use LinkedIn, as well as key opportunities and challenges.

Methodology

Qualitative studies have been found to be especially useful in researching new phenomena and concepts (Sinkovics et al. 2005). As academic literature on the strategic use of corporate influencers in B2B sales is still scarce, we decided to follow the explorative approach of the grounded theory methodology with expert interviews as our source of data (Gioia, Corley, and Hamilton 2013; Gioia 2021).

To collect our data, we conducted in-depth interviews with experts from which we expected relevant and profound data as well as a broad range of perspectives on the subject of our study (Yin 2016). Therefore, we specifically interviewed experts who work in the sales organization or a related function of a B2B firm, who see themselves as corporate influencers and who directly engage with their customers via LinkedIn. Using these criteria, we conducted 27 interviews in total until we reached theoretical saturation. Theoretical saturation is achieved when no new categories or properties arise from additional data (Strauss and Corbin 1998). A recognized guideline is "20 to 30 individuals to develop a well saturated theory" (Creswell 2007, p. 126).

We collected our interview data through semi-structured interviews via phone, video conference and face-to-face meetings from March 2020 to August 2021. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. The experts represent firms from various B2B industries (see Table 1).

Expert ID	Gender	Position in firm	Firm's industry	Interview duration (min)
A1	m	Head of Sales	Artificial Intelligence Solutions	37
A2	m	CEO	Artificial Intelligence Solutions	47
B1	m	Head of Digital Sales B2B	Energy Supply	36
B2	f	Senior Marketing Manager	Energy Supply	45
B2	f	Corporate Communications and Sales	Energy Supply	44
B3	f	Global Brand Management	Energy Supply	37
C1	f	HR Manager Employer Branding	Tool Manufacturer	51
D1	f	Head of Social Media Marketing	Online Marketing	28
E1	m	Business and Customer Experience Consultant	Electrical Engineering	44

E2	f	University Relations and Employer Branding Specialist	Electrical Engineering	60
E3	m	Sales Representative Projects/Solutions	Electrical Engineering	34
F1	m	Key Account Manager	Mechanical Engineering	28
F2	m	Industrial Sales Engineer	Mechanical Engineering	32
G1	f	Group Sales Director	Hygiene and Workwear	26
H1	m	Senior Account Manager	Logistics	47
I1	m	Head of Sales	IT	23
J1	m	Senior Sales Executive	IT	50
K1	m	General Manager Sales	Energy	37
L1	m	Chief Marketing Officer	Artificial Intelligence Solutions	41
M1	m	Manager Project Sales	Process Engineering	53
N1	f	Corporate Communications and Sales	Plant Engineering	46
O1	f	Head of Sales	Consulting	33
P1	f	Head of B2B Indirect Sales	Telecommunication	30
Q1	m	Senior Regional Sales Manager	Data Management	56
R1	m	Head of Market Development	Consulting	32
S1	m	Sales Manager Online Distribution	Protective Clothing	41
T1	m	Head of Sales	Mechanical Engineering	45

Table 1. Overview of expert interviews.

In line with our research questions, our interview guideline covered three main areas of investigation: (1) the experts' motivation to act as a corporate influencer, (2) their LinkedIn usage, as well as (3) their perceived opportunities and challenges when using LinkedIn. During data analysis, we followed an inductive, multi-level coding process. First, we assigned open and in-vivo codes to passages that provide relevant information to our research questions using the software MAXQDA. Second, we condensed the large amount of codes by seeking similarities and differences, and organizing similar codes into categories. We did this by constantly comparing the in-vivo codes and our memos across all interviews. This resulted in ten categories. Following the idea of axial coding (Strauss and Corbin 1998), we grouped relevant categories into emerging dimensions. We then identified connections between the different categories and condensed them into four aggregated dimensions. This iterative coding procedure was repeated until we arrived at a stable scheme of codes, categories and dimensions (Malshe and Sohi 2009). We followed a collaborative approach to analyze data where we discussed codes among all researchers to come up with a joint interpretation of the underlying interview data.

Findings

In the following section, we describe our findings and support them with excerpts from the interviews. Furthermore, we present our informant-centric in-vivo codes, categories, and dimensions, from which we derive an integrated conceptual framework (see Figure 1).

Our interviews indicate two different types of motivation leading to employees acting as corporate influencers. On the one hand, motivation can be intrinsic. It leads to the willingness of using LinkedIn not only during work hours but also after work without feeling stressed. The following statement demonstrates the intrinsic motivation that a huge part of our respondents reported: *“For me it is not stressful, because I have this inner drive, I say I want to do it and I have fun doing it.”* [#T1]

Our data analysis reveals that the high intrinsic motivation is also caused by the perceived high personal relevance of LinkedIn. LinkedIn does not only have an impact on the organization, but also on personal reputation. Corporate influencers can position themselves as experts in their specific industry, which is highlighted by the following interviewee: *“The corporate influencer can use [LinkedIn] for self-marketing, self-positioning, and creating an expert status.”* [#B2]

On the other hand, the motivation to act as a corporate influencer can be extrinsic and initiated by the marketing department or similar institution. One respondent stated: *“We kindly forced our salespeople to set up a profile on LinkedIn, if that has not happened before.”* [#N1]

Not all interviewed companies follow this strict approach though. Most of the interviewed firms try to trigger the employees' intrinsic motivation and do not apply pressure: *“[...] we try it the gentle way. We lead by example with our own LinkedIn usage and try to convince other colleagues this way.”* [#J1]

All interviewees confirmed through their responses that they act as corporate influencers on LinkedIn regardless of the origin of motivation. Our data also give insights into the LinkedIn usage by corporate influencers. They interact with their network through liking, commenting, sharing content and/or by sending direct messages: *“I always try to spend a good amount of my time with direct interaction by commenting or liking content or posting relevant things myself when I have the time.”* [#M1]

Furthermore, they use LinkedIn to purposefully collect information about the market environment in general, about specific projects or any other industry-specific news. For example, one interviewee reported: *“Instead of reading trade journals, I read LinkedIn.”* [#N1]

Besides collecting information and staying up-to-date, corporate influencers take advantage of LinkedIn to spread information fast and easily. One interviewee described that as follows: *“[...] keep our customers, potential customers and other contacts up to date on what is happening [...] without having to call everyone all the time.”* [#N1]

Another key activity of corporate influencers is that they are continuously putting effort into managing existing relationships and building their professional network, which is described by various respondents: *“LinkedIn is nowadays one of the most important tools to stay in touch with your customers.”* [#N1]

Besides managing existing relationships, corporate influencers are strategically enlarging and building their professional network by connecting online with colleagues, contractual partners, or other experts in the field. One expert stated: *“I then search for special keywords. [...] This enables me to find specific people who are also active in the same field as I am or who work at a project that we are part of.”* [#N1]

Furthermore, corporate influencers use LinkedIn for customer acquisition and searching for potential new customers. One interviewee highlighted: *“[...] on LinkedIn you can easily acquire new customers or at least find the right contacts to follow up with.”* [#H1]

The way LinkedIn is used by corporate influencers leads to various opportunities and challenges which they have to face. All respondents reported about opportunities that LinkedIn offers while acquiring potential customers.

During the traditional sales process, salespeople need to invest a lot of time and effort to find the right contact person. While trying to contact decisionmakers, they are often turned away on prior stations, so that a direct contact with decisionmakers may not even be established. This is exactly where LinkedIn offers a big chance: LinkedIn enables salespeople to specifically search for relevant members of a customer's buying center. This also includes decisionmakers or people in high management positions. These people can be contacted directly via LinkedIn and this is how LinkedIn helps to avoid gatekeepers. For example, one expert described this opportunity as: *“I can take all these people [in the buying center] into account [...]. I can write to them directly via LinkedIn, the buyer gets the prices, the engineer gets the information about the product, and the managing director gets general information, but they are all involved in the buying process, and I can inform all of them individually.”* [#B1]

Another chance revealed by our data analysis is that LinkedIn not only encourages salespeople to contact potential customers directly, but to approach them in a targeted way and on a more personal level. Prior to making initial contact with potential customers, detailed research can be conducted to obtain information through the counterpart's LinkedIn profile. Having information about potential customers that the salesperson would not have otherwise, can be an advantage for salespeople, as the statement illustrates:

“[...] ultimately, it's cold calling. But it's more lukewarm because you have a certain leap of faith [...].”
 [#M1]

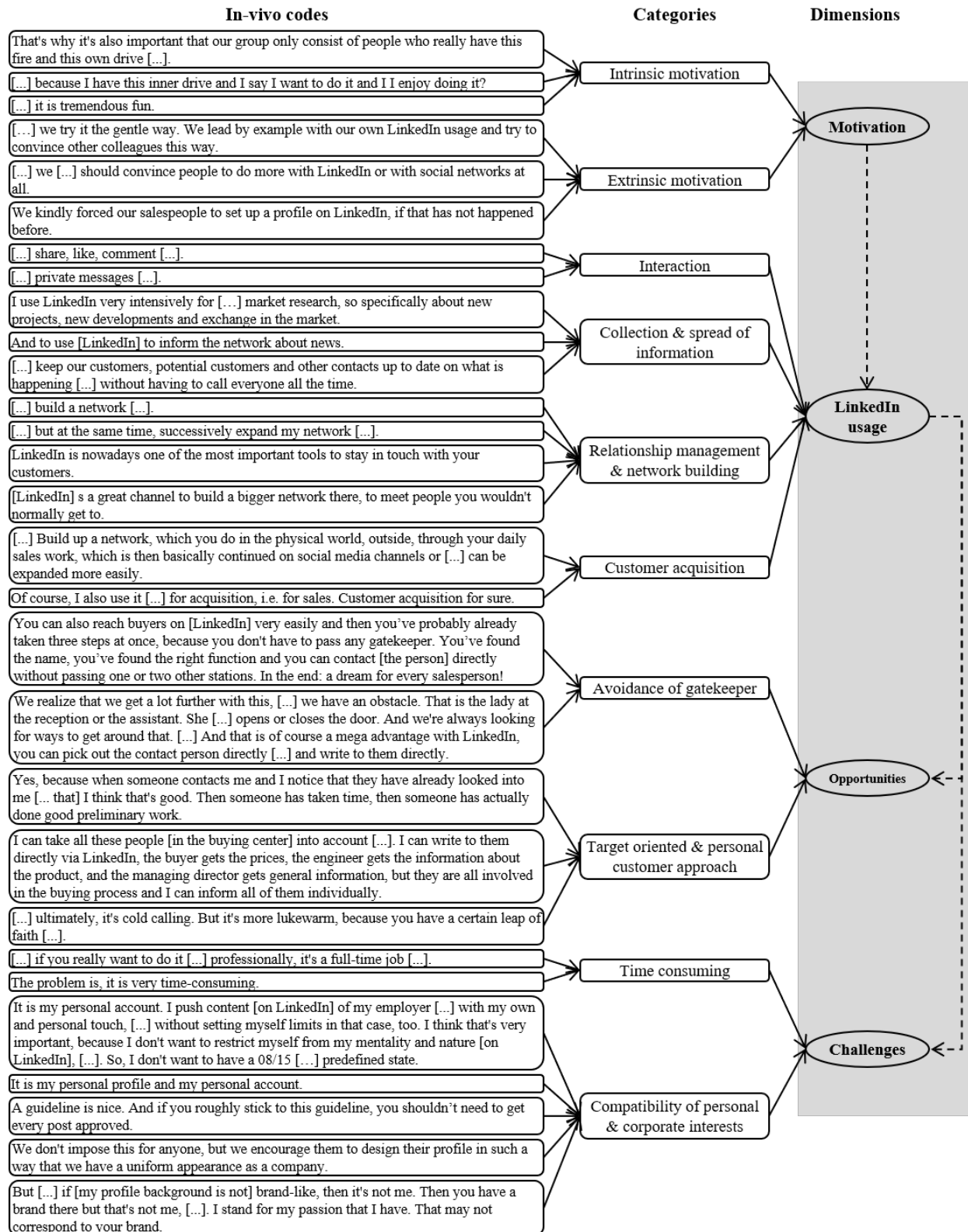


Figure 1. Data structure and conceptual framework.

In addition to the opportunities that corporate influencers are offered through their activities on LinkedIn, our analysis also uncovered challenges. The majority of the interviewees mention the professional and strategic use of LinkedIn, which is necessary to be acknowledged as a corporate influencer, as very time consuming.

“[...] if you really want to do it [...] professionally, it’s a full-time job!” [#M1]

The perceived very high expenditure of time can be a barrier to employees not wanting to take up corporate influencer activities in the first place.

Another revealed challenge is the compatibility of personal and corporate interests. Corporate influencers are acting on behalf of the firm, but with their private and personal profile on LinkedIn. The interviewees agreed that their firms should offer enough freedom for own choice of words, design of content and a flexible process where not every post needs to be checked by a supervisor before release. This is expressed by one respondent as follows: *“It is my personal account. I push content [on LinkedIn] of my employer [...] with my own and personal touch, [...] without setting myself limits in that case, too. I think that’s very important, because I don’t want to restrict myself from my mentality and nature [on LinkedIn], [...]. So, I don’t want to have a 08/15 [...] predefined state.” [#T1]*

Summarized, based on 27 in-depth expert interviews, we identified the dimension motivation as the basis for corporate influencers’ LinkedIn usage. Furthermore, we find two main opportunities and two main challenges for B2B sales organizations who encourage their salespeople to act as corporate influencers.

Discussion and Implications

This study is one of the first to explore B2B salespeople acting as corporate influencers. Our interview study reaffirms the high relevance of LinkedIn usage for B2B salespeople. We were able to identify *intrinsic* and *extrinsic* motivational factors that drive *LinkedIn usage*. Literature has already investigated drivers and inhibitors of salespeople’s social media usage. While Bill, Feurer, and Klarmann (2020) found out that social media’s usefulness for salespeople is perceived very low, our interviewees are very aware of the usefulness which support the intrinsic motivation of corporate influencers who have fun using LinkedIn. On the one hand, we identified *avoidance of gatekeepers* and the *target oriented and personal customer approach* as key opportunities. On the other hand, the *time-consumption* of using LinkedIn and the *compatibility of personal and corporate interests* were identified as key challenges. Most studies who have examined salespeople’s social media usage (e.g., Agnihotri et al. 2012; Levin, Hansen, and Laverie 2012; Schultz, Schwepker, and Good 2012b) looked at various social networks in their studies. We deliberately focused on LinkedIn, as it has proven to be the most suitable social network worldwide for corporate influencer activities and is seen to have great future potential for B2B sales. On that note, we advance the stream within the scarce corporate influencer research. Additionally, our findings offer several theoretical and practical implications, as well as avenues for future research, which we outline below.

Our findings show that corporate influencer activities offer advantages for B2B sales. LinkedIn offers a targeted approach towards the right members from buying centers. Buyers can be reached in fewer attempts, e.g., compared to traditional phone calls, without gatekeepers preventing it. Managers should encourage their corporate influencers to use personal information available through LinkedIn profiles when approaching buyers. This way, they can be contacted on a much more personal level which increases the chances of success and decreases the probability of rejection: *“If they’ve already accepted you, they’re open enough to at least give you a chance – ‘send something over’.” [#M1]*.

Our findings also reveal that using LinkedIn professionally is very time consuming. However, if corporate influencers have fun and see the personal relevance in the LinkedIn usage, they do not feel any stress. Therefore, it is very important that firms communicate personal and firm related opportunities of LinkedIn activities clearly, so that the purpose is comprehensible. Setting the example by highly intrinsic motivated employees and managers can also help to reduce potential barriers. Employees who are still unsure and inexperienced about using LinkedIn need more time for adoption and should be supported by trainings to become more confident and efficient in their LinkedIn usage.

Corporate influencers are only willing to invest extra time in using LinkedIn if they are given few or no restrictions by the firm when it comes to their LinkedIn activities. Even if firms often have the urge to control exactly how corporate influencers set up their profile, which content is covered, and how content

should be expressed, they should only give recommendations by offering guidelines, tools and trainings, but no strict requirements. Giving corporate influencers a free hand in the actual implementation guarantees coherence and consistency of their personal messages, which enables to be perceived as authentic.

Although this study provides novel insights that extend prior research, it has some limitations. Our approach follows the grounded theory-based research method as described by Gioia (2021). Our goal is to offer a first understanding of this emerging phenomenon of corporate influencers and not to validate any hypotheses. A natural next step would be an empirical validation to quantify effects and relationships. Furthermore, the study does not pretend to address all of the opportunities and challenges in this field. While our participants represented a wide variety of industries, future work may be targeted at examining additional industries. In addition, our 27 interviewees all provided information from the corporate influencer perspective. It would be helpful to triangulate their perceptions with data from the customer perspective. Despite these limitations, we are content that our findings provide useful insights for academics and practitioners.

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