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Sale Management,
Inter-culture, Learning

IO1 - task 1.2
Focus group

GENERAL REPORT

Introduction

The S.M.I.Le. project research in the partnership reference contexts aims at **analysing and evaluating from a qualitative and quantitative point of view the professional profile** with first, a desk research, second a focus group.

This two-step research work represents the antecedent and the base of the **Cross Cultural Sales Agent's Competence Dictionary**, which serves to define the features and to build the professional profile, which is the target of the S.M.I.Le. project, as well as the content of the related training courses. The learning content will be delivered to beneficiaries following mixed (traditional and advanced) learning techniques, via lectures, e-learning, on field experience and movie education.

This document is structured with a literature review on the topic of cross cultural issues in sales, stressing the importance and the actuality of it as enhanced in the academic literature, and then the methodological steps, findings and discussion of the focus group, which served as a base to define the professional profile and the competence dictionary of the **Cross Cultural Sales Agent**.

Literature review

In the last decades, globalization, improved technology, new communication devices, and social media have made global distances smaller, making possible doing business and making sales across the globe for both larger and smaller firms. This has represented a great source of opportunity, however companies involved in international business, deal with sales transactions

or negotiations which span national and cultural boundaries. That means, salespeople interact with individuals from unfamiliar cultures that exhibit different negotiation styles, behaviors and expectations about the "normal" process of negotiation (Graham and Sano, 1984). This presents several potential culture-related obstacles that confront the international negotiator (Simintiras & Thomas, 1998) , like the added difficulties related to the information and communication more or less context-related, the business etiquette etc. Competence, therefore, in international negotiations is one of the most important and indispensable skills in all kinds of international business (Fayerweather and Kapoor, 1972, 1976; Root, 1987; Wells, 1977).

Despite the growth of international business and the importance of international negotiations, the literature relevant to cross-cultural sales is scarce and fragmented. Though anecdotal stories about cross cultural critical episodes are pretty common, there is a paucity of research aimed at enhancing our understanding of why some salespeople are more effective than others in culturally diverse situations. This is problematic considering the fact many multinational firms now derive a large percentage of their sales revenues from overseas operations (Bush et al., 2001).

In addition, although selling is more personal and culture-bound than, for instance, advertising, the second has evolved a lot during the last decades, acknowledging and adapting to cultural differences, becoming more effective, as opposed to personal selling activities, that have kept being "conducted primarily on a national basis" (Terpstra 1987, p. 482). Moreover, Cook and

Herche offer that the “complex and demanding global environment impacts personal selling—perhaps more than any other area of the global enterprise” (1992, p. 32).

As a consequence, scholars have increasingly studied and given advice on how to increase critical features for successful international and cross-cultural salespeople.

Among the others, we can refer to the importance of **intercultural disposition** that includes (1) the ability to empathize with people from other cultures, (2) being astute noncritical observers of their own and other people's behavior, (3) being less ethnocentric, and (4) being accurate in perceiving differences and similarities between the sojourner's own culture and the host culture (Bush et al., 2001).

In addition, another fundamental aspect, emerged in the S.M.I.Le. focus groups as well, is **cultural intelligence**. The fundamental premise underlying the framework is that salespeople high in cultural intelligence are more likely to be effective when selling across cultures as they are better able to adapt to the cultural backgrounds of the customers they serve. Salespeople effective in cross-cultural sales situations utilize cognitions or knowledge structures (CQ) to alter behaviors (cultural adaptation) in order to enhance performance (Hansen et al, 2013).

Therefore, when building a professional profile and a training course related to this particular topic, indications provided by literature should be taken into account, as well as the results of the desk research (partners’ national contexts databases of professional profiles related to the target) and the focus group (experts and professionals’ indications).

Methodology

The partnership, drawing from the desk research and the draft of the Cross Cultural sales agent competence dictionary, has furtherly tried to identify the needs to adopt in the **4 Focus Groups (1 IT, 1 EL, 1 BG, 1 PL)** with the preparation of questionnaires to analyse and evaluate the high skills to be administered to a panel of experts in intercultural sales process and SMEs representatives.

The following points, in compliance with the project, were purposed, selected and commonly approved in the kick-off meeting (December 2018, Ancona):

- **the definition of the methodology**
- **the design of questionnaires and tools to hold in-depth interviews and focus groups**
- **profile of representatives of the economic/productive SME system and the experts**
- **conduct in-depth interviews and focus groups**
- **National reports on the focus group research**

Each country's partners organized, moderated and analysed the results of **1 Focus Group** (1 IT,1 EL, 1 BG, 1 PL) in national language, involving small groups (5-10) of **experts in intercultural sales process** (trainers, categories reps, professors) and **SMEs representatives** (entrepreneurs, sales managers, sales agents, export managers, supervisors, sales experts, recruiters, customers ecc) from B2B companies, with a relevant part of the turnover abroad.

Semi-structured group interview and discussion (1-2 hrs) were conducted to validate the **Competence dictionary** draft, emerging from the **Desk Research General Report**.

During each Focus Group, the moderator (1 skilled professional and 3 international marketing and business scholars) illustrated the issue and presented the aim of the project and the profile of the **Cross Cultural Sales Agent** in general. During the sessions (60-90 mins), moderators introduced the profile draft without naming or mentioning any specific capability, knowledge or skill. Data collection was based on oral discussion and aided by paper sheets formats, where interviewee wrote notes, guided by the moderator. Discussion style was chosen by the moderator between turn or spontaneous speaking.

The discussion blueprint is summarized in next table.

Table 1. Focus Group content

<p>1. Describe a situation where an International Salesman/saleswoman performance was excellent. What were the circumstances? (everybody answers + moderator solicitates the discussion)</p>	
<p>2. Tell a culturally-related issue/problem/episode (positive or negative): what competencies would have avoided problems? What competencies would have created opportunity? (everybody answers + moderator solicitates the discussion)</p>	
<p>3. The Cross Cultural Sales Agent has 3 main competences (describe). What is the most important?</p> <p>– Rank the following abilities (rank from 1: most important to 5: least important)</p>	
Abilities	Rank (1-5)
Intercultural and cross-cultural business communication	
Stakeholder Communication	
Command of foreign language	
Digital technologies-assisted communication	

International means of payment operation

- Concerning this groups of **knowledge**, what is the **most important** within each group?

Knowledge

- Business Ethics
 - Understands the influence of national culture on business communication practices
 - Familiarity with intercultural communication peculiarities and their impact on the process of servicing domestic customers
 - Awareness of major cross-cultural differences and their impact on the process of servicing foreign customers
- Familiarity with core professional terminology in a foreign language (foreign languages)
 - Providing marketing studies and research on international level
 - Servicing customers in foreign language if necessary
 - Consults customers in either Native or foreign language, describing the customer value of the products offered, as well as their features (ingredients, packaging, usage instructions, maintenance, price, quantity)
 - International project development, management and implementation
- Communicates in either Native or foreign language through various digital technology tools
 - Understands the influence of cross-cultural differences in the case of application of digital technology communication tools
 - Digital marketing
- International public finance and International finance management
 - Familiarity with international non-cash paying methods
 - Recognizing international credit cards
 - Processing payments with international credit cards

(everybody briefly reports and comments their answers + moderator solicitates the discussion)

4. **Profile and competence set: discussion and validation.**

Specific competences set of the Cross Cultural Sales Agent

- **Planning sales actions**
- **Business negotiation management**

- **Data processing and sales projections**
- **International marketing - Basic and specific aspects**
- **Intercultural competence**

(everybody answers + moderator solicitates the discussion)

5. What do you think should be the **level of autonomy and responsibility** of the Cross Cultural Sales Agent?

[provide examples: Does he/she makes long-term plans or rather gives them execution? Does he/she manage people and resources? Do you think this position should imply self management and resource allocation or he/she should be hierarchically under the sales management like any other salesperson?]

(everybody answers + moderator solicitates the discussion)

6. **Emerging needs in cross-cultural / international sales?**

(everybody answers + moderator solicitates the discussion)

Results summary

The four national samples were purposefully created by including a variety of people, roles, types of organization and businesses of reference.

- **The total number of participants is 31, of both genders**
- **The age of the participants was between 35 and 60**
- **All the involved participants were graduates, including masters and MBAs and two PhD (one CEO, one scholar)**
- **Job type/roles involved (different levels of experience and responsibilities, see next figure)**

Figure 1. sample characteristics: type of roles involved



- **Business / Fields:** Manufacturing, Pharmaceutical, Construction Commodities, Textile, Footwear, Toys, Wine & Spirits, Agricultural, Retail and Services Sector, International Relations, Advertisement, Organization of Events, Corporate Banking, Consulting, University, Business Training, Chamber of Commerce.
- **Institution / Firm Characteristics:** expert and professionals work in small organizations, consulting, services and educational agencies, larger firms, chamber of commerce, all internationalized.
- **Personal Experience:** Professional experience between 10 and 35 years, including experience in sales between 0 and 35 years.

Therefore, in general the maximum variability of background and experiences were selected to contribute to this confirmatory study, representing a solid base, validated by practitioners, experienced business people and trainers, to define the perfect Cross-Cultural Sales Agent professional profile.

Interviewees in general seemed curious, participative and interested on the topic. **In particular, when asked about international critical business episodes, many of the issues were related to the language, the culture and the international business etiquette.**

Particularly, answers to question 1, which was about international experience and business in general, tended to gravitate around communication and culturally related issues, thus referring to soft skills or abilities related to communication, market knowledge, cultural intelligence etc. The polish sample represented an exception, in the sense that the discussion related to question 1 focused more on other job duties and features (such as market development, goal achievement

etc.), facing the cultural aspects just more in depth in question number 2. Question number two had more homogeneous results and answers, being focused on cross cultural issues and episodes.

Figure 2. Some examples of quotations and episodes (questions 1-2)



After the first general questions, interviewees were asked to **rank the abilities and knowledge**, to have confirm of how the competencies should be composed and to furtherly stimulate the discussion indirectly on what are the activities, the duties and the abilities of the target profile.

Although the responses about the abilities were difficult to aggregate even within national samples, the general feeling emerged during the discussions indicated the attention towards the communication and negotiation, with particular attention to linguistic and cultural aspects.

Table 1. Question 3: abilities response summary

<i>Abilities</i>	<i>Ranked</i>
Intercultural and cross-cultural business communication	1
Stakeholder communication	2
Command of foreign language	3
Digital technologies-assisted communication	4
International means of payment operation	5

In the knowledge sets, interviewees had to select at least one knowledge type within every group, therefore some results regard means of communication and also payment systems, however it seems more due to the research format rather than interviewees priority and attention. In particular:

- **All the interviewees agree in the focus on the cultural difference awareness**
- **Digital communication was found most important by Greece, Poland and Bulgaria**
- **The Italian sample paid less attention to the marketing aspects, stressing the importance of interaction.**

Table 2. Question 3: knowledge response summary

<i>Knowledge (the selected most relevant ones)</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Awareness of major cross-cultural differences and their impact on the process of servicing foreign customers
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consults customers in either Native or foreign language, describing the customer value of the products offered, as well as their features (ingredients, packaging, usage instructions, maintenance, price, quantity)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Understands the influence of cross-cultural differences in the case of application of digital technology communication tools
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Familiarity with international non-cash paying methods • International public finance and International finance management

Following the FG structure, the **question 3** concluded with the **validation of the 5 specific selected competencies**:

- Planning sales actions
- Business negotiation management
- Data processing and sales projections
- International marketing - Basic and specific aspects
- Intercultural competence.

It seems that among the various competencies selected in the first phase of research, searching and comparing the professional profiles of reference in the partners' contexts, the more important chosen among the set of five are international competence, international marketing and business negotiation.

Figure 3. Main capabilities validated



In addition, **the discussion on the purposed competence set**, participants agreed with the set of competencies of the profile draft. Some participants stressed the need for the sales agent to master the market he/she works in, as a key parameter for top performance. In this, language skills, marketing knowledge and business development had particular attention. However, a successful sales starts with good planning, and then negotiation and adaptation to the cultural ethics/code of each country. Those two were considered significant preconditions for success.

Much attention was posed on the Cross Cultural Sales Agent set of **soft skills: tolerance, diplomacy, curiosity, dedication, passion, humility, adaptability ecc.**

Finally, regarding the **Level of autonomy** (question 5) of the Cross Cultural Sales Agent, there was much heterogeneity in every partner's session, in the sense that interviewees stressed that this depends on the specificity of the organization. In fact, the autonomy and the hierarchical level of the professional profile depends on the firm it is inserted in: the bigger and the more structured, the more he/she should be integrated in the pre-existent sales organization structure, including the aspects regarding hierarchy and rewards, while in smaller firms he/she should also be external and/or more independent. Proactivity and autonomy are fundamental in sales and business development, as stressed by the Greek participants.

However, all the interviewees agree on the tendency, besides the characteristics of the firm, on the high level on autonomy and maximum attention on setting **performance indicators and indexes**. More in depth, this autonomy could be translated in three different ways (see next table, from the Greek session of the focus group) that includes all the positions related to that particular topic.

Table 3. forms of autonomy for the Cross Cultural Sales Agent

<p><i>The Cross Cultural Sales Agent should hierarchically be under the Business Development Director. He/she should be autonomous and be asked only to bring specific results. The way to provide these results should reside with his/her experience. He/she should provide the Director with a specific target and sales plan every year, provided that there is a solid budget he/she can work on.</i></p>
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Regardless of the cross cultural element, a Sales Agent should be autonomous and monitored throughout the sales process (opportunities, pitches, closures, etc) via specific pre-set KPIs.

The level of autonomy and responsibility of the Cross Cultural Sales Agent should be high, in order to be able to take initiatives.

Discussion

We try now to summarise all the aspects emerged during the focus groups sessions in some bullet points.

Best practices and critical competences in general

- In international business you need to master many different abilities: cultural, managerial, diplomatic, communicative.
- Importance of the knowledge about the international environment.
- The cross-cultural awareness of the sales agent, which affects his/her preparation, negotiation, flexibility, and overall selling performance, was appointed as a key competence. Marketing and digital skills were also among those that the majority of participants considered very important.

Profile validation

- Most of the participants agreed with the draft sales agent profile. All of them agreed on the need for intercultural competence, communication with stakeholders, international marketing knowledge, planning and negotiation.
- Data processing and sales projections were partly addressed, but most of the participants considered them within the issues of planning and communicating.
- He/she should be quite autonomous in his/her daily work, but this depends on the type of firm and industry of reference.

Emerging issues

- Cultural intelligence, inclusion of cross-cultural elements in future sales agents' education and digital competencies were the main issues that participants pointed.
- The international sales career can be complicated and requires sacrifice but is also source of performance and personal satisfaction.
- Motivation, dedication, general vs specific cultures and languages to master.
- Stimulate the cross-cultural sales agent to be knowledgeable about global trends that could affect his/her work, as well as how to best use the digital technologies.

Conclusions

The present document represents the sum and the elaboration of all partners work and effort on their desk research and focus group. Following data collection, the profiles' **Comparative Analysis** helped in defining the **Dictionary Draft** and leading the **Focus Group**, the aim of which was involving experts and professionals in validating the research findings. The 31 professionals all seemed interested and positively impressed by the purpose of the project, in addition to agreeing with the competencies already selected for the **CrossCultural Sales Agent Competence Dictionary**.

More in depth, the present research was intended to validate the first research task, the creation of a professional profile referencing the context databases to match competencies and define the features and characteristics of the **Cross Cultural Sales Agent**.

Data collection and analysis showed differences in terms of sensitivities and attention of the national groups, for instance on the focus on interaction, as opposed to digital tools. However, the evident agreement on the importance of mastering the international aspects and the cultural elements converge and confirm the desk research results. This allows researchers concluding that the most important characteristics and competencies of the **Cross Cultural Sales Agent** are defined and finalized.

In fact, it seems that among all the possible features emerged from the first research phase, the ones that received most attention and priority from the 31 experts and professionals involved were the **Intercultural competence**, **International marketing** and **Business negotiation**. The other possible competencies to take into account (sales planning and digital abilities) were considered within the others or as means to put the other three competences to action.

The general focus in fact was particularly on the communicative, diplomatic, cultural aspects of doing promotion, sales and negotiation in different cultural settings, more than on sales-specific aspects. This is coherent with the aim of the project and also enhances the fact that other roles have carried on internationalization activities for decades (export managers, marketing managers etc.) but their focus was on market and context analysis or on payment and international shipping issues. Those issues are surely critical and specific of other job types and roles, those were not specific on the cultural aspects, those are the core of this project's target profile. Therefore, the Cross Cultural Sales Agent's core capabilities will result defined and not overlapping with other roles specific capabilities and activities, resulting a precious member the internationalization and sales team, solving problems and enriching the organizations' knowledge and relational capital.

Bibliography

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Appendix

Table 1. Summary of results: BULGARIA

<i>Number of participants</i>	8 in the focus group in Sofia and 3 personally interviewed participants from Blagoevgrad region.
<i>Age</i>	35-60
<i>Gender</i>	male and female
<i>Job Type / Role</i>	sales agents, head of departments and managers / Financial company, consultancy companies , trade companies, entertainment organizer, advertisement company, textile company
<i>Business / Field</i>	Most of the companies representatives deal with the sales activities of their companies incl. on international markets
<i>Institution / Firm Characteristics</i>	Bachelor and master in economics
<i>Personal Education (Field And Level)</i>	more than 10 years of experience

Table 2. Summary of results: GREECE

<i>Number of participants</i>	7
<i>Age</i>	38-59 (average 47)
<i>Gender</i>	[3 people] 43% female, [4 people] 57% male
<i>Job Type / Role</i>	Chief Commercial Officer, Department of International Relations Officer, Export Manager, Export Consultant, Sales Instructor, Import Export Administrator, Exports Trainer / Retail and Services Sector, International Relations, Wine & Spirits, Business Training, Agricultural Exports
<i>Business / Field</i>	a) Multinational retail group that specializes in digital sales & marketing, b2b e-commerce and loyalty programs in retail, b) Athens Chamber of Commerce and Industry, which helps the export process of thousands of Greek companies c) Boutique winery in the Peloponnese, with export activity in EU and the USA, d) independent export consultant, who helps Greek farmers and agricultural SMEs in their export activities, e) Sales instructor (teaches sales as part of the MBA program of two Colleges), f) Exports trainer, who run independent seminars and workshops about the export activity throughout Greece, g) entrepreneur preparing a platform that brings together companies and clients for exports

<i>Institution / Firm Characteristics</i>	All participants have a Master's degree (Master's in International Business Relations, MSc in Applied Economics and Strategy, Master in International Management, MBA)
<i>Personal Education (Field And Level)</i>	Total years of experience: 16 to 27, with an average of 21.5 years Years of Sales Experience: 15 to 22, with an average of 16.8 years

Table 3. Summary of results: ITALY

<i>Number of participants</i>	6
<i>Age</i>	37-57
<i>Gender</i>	2 m / 4 f
<i>Job Type / Role</i>	Marketing manager, HR manager, Export Sales Director, CEO, International director, Internationalization expert
<i>Business / Field</i>	Construction, Toys (x2), Footwear, Chamber of commerce (x2)
<i>Institution / Firm Characteristics</i>	1 SME born traditional and become international, construction, operating in 70 countries with independent dealer and distributors 2 and 3 Medium Firm in the toys sector, specialized in educational toys for children, 200 mln€ income per year 4 Footwear startup (5 yrs), 95% income abroad specialized in high tech custom footwear 5 Chamber of commerce startup working on internationalization 6 one of the local chambers of commerce, section for international affairs for SME's internationalization
<i>Personal Education (Field And Level)</i>	5 graduates, 1 PhD 5-20 (average 15) years of experience

Table 4. Summary of results: POLAND

<i>Number of participants</i>	7
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<i>Age</i>	between 35 and 58
<i>Gender</i>	5 women, 2 men
<i>Job Type / Role</i>	sales manager, researcher/ lecturer, senior relationship manager, international sales assistance / manufacturing, education, corporate banking, consulting
<i>Business / Field</i>	Manufacturers, University, bank, consulting agency
<i>Institution / Firm</i> <i>Characteristics</i>	University, master level
<i>Personal Education (Field And Level)</i>	Professional experience between 10 and 35 years, including experience in sales between 0 and 35 years