Coping with setbacks in B2B saleswork - An exploratory study of Finnish industrial corporations

Petteri Tuomimaa

Tekijä(t) Petteri Tuomimaa	
Koulutusohjelma Liiketalouden koulutusohjelma	
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Tämä opinnäytetyö keskittyy myyjien kohtaamiin haasteisiin yritysten välisessä myyntityössä ja siihen, kuinka he käsittelevät kyseisiä haasteita. Esitetyt näkemykset perustuvat myyntityössä oleville henkilöille tehtyihin haastatteluihin MANIA-tutkimushankkeen puitteissa. Tavoitteena on kasvattaa ymmärrystä niin organisaatioiden, tiimien kuin yksilöidenkin näkökulmasta. Lisäksi opinnäytetyö sivuaa psykologisen pääoman hyödyntämistä myyntityössä.

Opinnäytetyössä on teoriaosa ja empiirinen osa. Teoriaosassa käsitellään myynnin johtamista, motivaatiota, palkitsemista, positiivista psykologiaa ja stressinhallintaa. Empiirisessä osassa tarkastellaan myyjien näkemyksiä stressaavista tekijöistä ja haasteista myyntityössä, sekä siitä miten he kyseisten haasteiden kanssa toimivat. Opinnäytetyö on tehty käyttäen laadullisia haastatteluita. Tutkimuksen yritykset ovat suomalaisia, mutta toimivat kansainvälisessä ympäristössä.

Haastatteluiden pohjalta myyntityötä tekevien stressitekijöitä pystyttiin tunnistamaan ja luokittelemaan. Myös myyntityötä tekevien stressinhallintaa tarkasteltiin luokittelun lisäksi erilaisilta organisaatiotasoilta. Suurimpana haasteena nousi esiin epäselvät mittarit ja niiden ohjaava vaikutus.

Opinnäytetyö antaa yrityksille näkemystä siitä, mitkä seikat myyntityössä stressaavat eniten ja toisaalta, miten myyntiorganisaatioita voisi kehittää yhteistyötä korostavampaan suuntaan. Yksittäiselle myyjälle tämä voi antaa ajatuksia siihen, miten omaa tekemistä voisi kehittää hyödyntäen esimerkiksi psykologista pääomaa.

Avainsanat Myyntityö, stressinhallinta, vastoinkäymiset, psykologinen pääoma, kulttuurit, MANIA

| **Author(s)** |
| Petteri Tuomimaa |

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This thesis is focused on the setbacks faced by salespeople in B2B-sales context. It also deals with how they cope with these setbacks. The views expressed in this thesis are based on the interviews conducted on salespeople in the MANIA research project. The goal of this thesis is to increase knowledge regarding this subject on organizational, team and personal levels. In addition to this it touches the subject of psychological capital from sales perspective.

Thesis is comprised of a theoretical and an empirical part. The theoretical part handles sales management, motivation, compensation, positive psychology and coping. The empirical part examines sales people's perspectives of stressors and setbacks in sales work and how they cope with them. The thesis has been conducted using qualitative interviews. The companies that participated in the research are based in Finland, but function internationally.

Based on the interviews the stressors of sales people were identified and categorised. Also coping methods were categorised and inspected from different organisational levels. The greatest identified challenge was unclear metrics and their effect on sales work.

This thesis gives companies insight into the factors that cause most stress in sales work and on the other hand how sales organisations could be changed to be more collaborative. To a sales person this might give ideas on how to develop one's work for example by utilising psychological capital.

| **Keywords** |
| Saleswork, coping, setbacks, psychological capital, cultures, MANIA |

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1   Introduction

This chapter focuses on giving a background for this thesis. Included within are subjects such as the topic and its relevance, scope of the research and research questions. The research consortium behind the project will be presented as well.

1.1   Background

The landscape of selling has changed radically in the last 60 years. In the 1950's for example the selling process was quite linear and product focused where seller and the information he held made him more powerful than the buyer. Finding clients and making sales was quite easy, as the buyer did not have effective tools to compare different options outside local options. In the 1990's selling started to centre more on helping the customer make the right choice rather than bringing the maximum profit to the seller. The rise of the Internet in the 2000's has further altered both business-to-business and business to consumer sales. (Gorman & Collis 2010, 66; Kumar, Sarang & Leone 2014, 591; Manning, Ahearne & Reece 2014, 37, 63, 395; Mattson & Parvinen 2011, 14-15.)

In today's world, the buyer has the edge with easily accessible information and clearly visible options. In the west, the shift from primarily manufacturing business to service-based business coupled with globalisation has been a large factor in transforming the nature of sales. Copying a product and manufacturing it in China is easy. Copying a product as a service is not. This is where the expertise of the sales people comes in. (Gorman & Collis 2010, 66; Kumar, Sarang & Leone 2014, 591; Manning, Ahearne & Reece 2014, 37, 63, 395; Mattson & Parvinen 2011, 14-15.)

Kumar, Sarang & Leone (Kumar & al. 2014, 591-593) talk about businesses' shifting from backward-looking strategic perspective to a forward-looking one and the need for sales organizations to adapt to this change in order to maximise their performance. In the same vein, positive psychology spearheaded by Martin Seligman focuses on positives and building strength in contrast to the traditional way of focusing on what is broken and how to fix it. (Levene 2015, 7.)

Albeit the evident evolution seen in sales, sales management has not evolved in the same pace. Modern sales work has a heavy emphasis on building long-term connections in the buyer organization. In recent years, a slow change in to a mix of qualitative and quantitative criteria has been seen. Despite of this the seller's performance is still heavily gauged on quantitative rather than qualitative criteria, often on a quarterly basis. This among other

things creates the risk of pushing underperforming sales people to make hasty deals with potentially detrimental results to the relationship with the buyer. (Harvard Business Review 2015a; SN4 2015.)

The clash between the new way of doing sales and the old way of managing sales people creates a problem for the coping of sales people in the long term. There is little research in to the subject of coping from sales context. Yet the well-being of salespeople has a direct effect to the financial success of the company. (Manning & al. 2014, 37, 63, 395; Mattson & Parvinen 2011, 14-15; SN4 2015.)

1.2 The Client

MANIA-research project is a multi-disciplinary project conducted between 1.1.2014 and 30.3.2016 by a consortium consisting of Haaga-Helia University of Applied Sciences, Aalto University, Helsinki University, University of Toledo, Snellman-korkeakoulu, Barona Group Oy, Canon Oy, Fountain Park Oy, Happimaa Oy, Konecranes Finland Oy, Movenote Oy and Rocla Solutions Oy. The project is aiming to spark up new ideas and create new tools on the field of business-to-business selling and to help the participating companies to improve their sales success. (MANIA 2015.)

One of the unique aspects of MANIA-research project is the fact that it utilizes information gathered from both the selling and buying organizations point of view. This thesis draws its foundation solely from the perspective of the members of the selling organization.

1.3 Overview and object of the research

Research looking in to coping at sales work in a 21st century setting is quite limited. Most coping research is done from the perspective of the healthcare sector. (Theseus 2015.) Some research has been done on how psychological capital can be utilized in sales work (Leppä & Hölttä 2014.) Due to the lack of sales research from these perspectives, this thesis aims to combine evolution of sales with sales management practices and occupational wellbeing from the perspective of business-to-business salespeople.

All the professionals whose interviews and interactions have been studied for this thesis are working for multinational business-to-business selling companies. The companies selected are all traditionally industrial companies that have been updating their business to be more service oriented in the past decade. The studied professionals have a varied amount of experience from the field of business-to-business selling. They are in diverse positions inside their respective organizations. This helps provide an overall image of the

evolution of sales and sales management. A more detailed view of the analysed person-nel will be presented in chapter 4.2.

There is no hypothesis made in this thesis in need of backing by quantitative research and as such qualitative research method has been chosen. Due to the lack of prior research from this perspective the thesis has been made in the form of exploratory case study uti-lizing themed and narrative interviews. (Hirsjärvi, Remes & Sajavaara 2013, 139-140, 160-164.)

1.4 Research questions

Based on the research data, this study attempts to answer the following research ques-tions:

1. What kind of pressures/stress do salespeople face and experience in their daily work?
2. How are setbacks dealt with in sales organizations?

As an additional question, this study aims to discuss how could pshychological capital be better utilized in dealing with setbacks. This will be handled in the discussion section of the thesis.

1.5 Key Words

Coping – Various skills and strategies of dealing with different types of stress through con-scious means. (Rantanen & Tolvanen 2014, 189; Snyder 1999, 5)

CRM – Customer relationship management. The process of creating and maintaining cus-tomer relationships aiming to increase customer value. Usually through a system that au-tomatically gathers information related to customer relationships from various sources, making co-operation within the company easier. (Manning & Al. 2014, 536; Mattson & Parvinen 2011, 26.)

KPI – Key Performance Indicator. Various quantifiable ways to check if the strategic and operational goals of the company are met. In sales for instance turnover and profitability are used as KPIs. (Investopedia 2015; Wikipedia 2015.)

Sales management – Different processes related to managing a sales force such as re-cruiting, training, productivity assessment etc. (Manning & al. 2014, 384, 539.)

Psychological capital – an individual's positive psychological state of development that is characterised by:(1) having confidence (self-efficacy) to take on and put in the necessary effort to succeed in challenging tasks; (2) making a positive attribution (optimism) about succeeding now and in the future; (3) persevering toward goals, and when necessary, re-directing paths to goals (hope) in order to succeed; and (4) when beset by problems and adversity, sustaining and bouncing back and even beyond (resilience) to attain success (Luthans, Youssef & Avolio, 2007a, 3).

Qualitative criteria – A way to assess productivity of sales people. Includes soft aspects such as attitude, communication skills, customer goodwill generation, initiative, providing training to other salespeople, providing advice based on product knowledge and team collaboration. (Donaldson 2007, 146-147; Manning & al. 2014, 395, 538.)

Quantitative criteria – A way to assess productivity of sales people. Includes hard number based aspects such as sales volume in euros, number of new accounts opened, net profit per account, number of customer calls and number of meetings arranged (Donaldson 2007, 143-146; Manning & al. 2014, 395, 538.)

1.6   Structure of the thesis

This thesis has six chapters starting with this introductory chapter. Chapters two and three deal with theories related to sales management, coping and psychological capital. In the sales management chapter, some traditional and upcoming methods of sales management are introduced in conjunction with cultural influences on management and motivation. The third chapter lays out the concept behind psychological capital and their effects of work performance and covers coping. The fourth chapter is focused on the research methodology of the thesis and explains more about the data collection methods and what the data is composed of. In the fifth chapter the research questions are answered using the collected data. The sixth chapter draws everything together and includes ideas for further research.

2 Sales management

2.1 Quantitative and qualitative performance measurement

Quantitative and qualitative criteria are used to evaluate the salesforce and individual salespeople. Qualitative criteria include soft aspects such as attitude, communication skills, customer goodwill generation, initiative, self-organisation, product knowledge, team collaboration and time spent providing training to other salespeople. Quantitative criteria include hard number based aspects such as sales volume in euros, number of new accounts opened, net profit per account, sales to new customers, number of customer calls and number of meetings arranged. (Donaldson 2007, 143-147; Jobber & Lancaster 2015, 472-483; Manning & al. 2014, 395, 538;)

Traditionally quantitative criteria have been preferred over qualitative criteria, but an increasing amount of companies have started to put more weight on qualitative criteria such as customer satisfaction. This is partially since customer satisfaction is nowadays very easy to measure using tools such as Net promoter score or NPS devised by Fred Reichheld. NPS is calculated based on the answer to the question "How likely is it that you would recommend our company / product / service to a friend or colleague". The question is usually based on a scale from 0 to 10. (Donaldson 2007, 143-147; Harvard Business Review 2003; Jobber & Lancaster 2015, 472-483; Manning & al. 2014, 395, 538;)

2.2 Cultural influences on sales management

"Culture is a sum of the knowledge, values, beliefs and attitudes that are shared by a particular group of people or society." (Donaldson 2007, 150).

Andy Molinsky (Forbes 2013) describes global dexterity as an ability to adapt one's behaviour across different cultures without losing a sense of self. Traditionally speaking adapting has been seen to be the job of the employees. As Molinsky (Forbes 2013) points out, business has never been as global as it is today and moving smoothly between cultures is an important skill. Similarly, in international business understanding cultural differences is regarded to be vital for financial success. The importance of cultural differences in sales management is however quite overlooked. Understanding the cultural differences within a country can help in choosing the right methods of managing people. (Manning & al. 2014, 83-85, 89, 392.)

In addition to the national culture having an impact on organizations, the language, social habits, processes and people of a company create their own culture – company culture. Similarly, the way that sales is done inside a company creates a sales culture inside the company. Good culture positively impacts employee motivation and through that customer satisfaction and revenue. (Harvard Business Review 2015b; Ridnour, Laask & Shepherd 2001; Pullins, Timonen, Kaski & Holopainen, 2017.)

2.2.1 Hofstede's cultural dimensions theory

One way to look in to the differences between different national cultures is to utilize Hofstede's cultural dimensions theory. Hofstede's research is originally based on analysing a large database of employee value scores collected from IBM in 1967 and 1973. Further studies have been made later to update and refine the results. All humans are naturally unique but cultural dimensions give a basis to compare different cultures together. (Hofstede, Hofstede & Minkov 2010, 150; The Hofstede Centre 2015a.)

Currently based on the results six different dimensions have been created to measure cultural differences between countries: Power distance index, individualism versus collectivism, masculinity versus femininity, uncertainty avoidance index, long term orientation versus short term normative orientation and indulgence versus restraint. The dimensions are given a score between 0 and 100, indicating the strength of the dimension. For the purposes of this thesis only one dimension will be analysed in a more detailed fashion. (The Hofstede Centre 2015a.)

A high score in masculinity versus femininity means that the country is masculine. Masculine societies are driven by willingness to be the best in what they do. A high competitive drive propels people forwards. A low score in the dimension indicates that the country is feminine. Feminine societies value quality of life and enjoying what you do. Standing out by being the best is not sought after. (The Hofstede Centre 2015a; The Hofstede Centre 2015b.)

2.2.2 Hofstede's cultural dimensions in practice

Before making decisions on how to manage your sales force is to understand the impact of national culture on your employees. The way salespeople are led in New York, USA does not necessary resonate well in Helsinki, Finland. For instance, in the USA the masculinity index is 62, whereas in Finland it is 26. People of the United States love to compete and work hard giving up a lot of spare time to be the best in their field. This makes

them highly receptive to sales competitions as attention is perceived as a positive thing. Finland on the other hand is very feminine. People work to enjoy life, flexibility such as long vacations is highly appreciated and status like titles and winning competitions is not that important. This is evident in many places in Finnish society such as the education system which according to an OECD report assumes that "*expert thinking, complex communication and creative problem solving can only flourish when collaboration is maximised and competition is minimised*". (OECD 2012, 103; The Hofstede Centre 2015a.)

Copying practices without modification within a company might not be the best course of action. In a case described by Hofstede & al. (2010; 141-142) a general manager was chosen for a production plant in the Netherlands by the company's American Vice president. The Vice president made the decision – despite the warnings of the Human Resources manager – because he saw the new general manager as "a real man" having attributes of a strong leader. The hire wound up being a disaster, as his way of leading did not work at all in the Dutch working environment. (Manning & al. 2014, 83-85, 89; Hofstede & al. 2010; 141 - 146.)

Historically speaking sales management as a concept is heavily influenced by the masculine British and American cultures. The job of adapting the company culture in practice is often in the hands of local managers, backed by the example set by top management and framework set by company practices. (Manning & al. 2014, 83-85, 89; Hofstede & al. 2010; 141 - 146.)

2.3   Motivation and compensation

Motivation for salespeople is traditionally derived from running sales competitions, incentives for superior performance and through regular control meetings, which in the 21st century are often implemented through virtual environments as sales teams can span multiple continents. The aim of these practices is traditionally three-fold: To motivate the top salespeople to keep working on a high level, to pressure the average salesmen to improve their results and according to Adams (2000, 148) to shame those who have failed to reach the minimum quota set by the management. These methods of evaluating success or failure are often purely based on quantitative criteria such as sales numbers, sales volume, and conversion rate from cold-calls to sales meeting. (Adams 2000, 148, 188; Harvard Business Review 2015a; Manning & al. 2014, 384.)

Despite differences within different cultures the archetype of a successful salesperson is similar in different cultures according to Diane Coutu (Harvard Business Journal 2006.)

She calls sales people "Happy Losers" – sort of addicted gamblers who realize that they lose most of the time but they are thrilled by the off chance of winning big, and losing doesn't mean the end of the world. Doug Chung says that salespeople have a "larger appetite for risk than other workers" (Harvard Business Journal 2015.) It is no wonder that motivating sales people has focused on different forms of compensation based on quantitative criteria. (Harvard Business Journal 2006; Harvard Business Review 2015a.)

While sales work has changed, and become more difficult in terms of content there is a clear gap between theory and practice in sales according to research. Salespeople for example often know that they should actively listen to customers, adapt their behavior in different situations and follow-up on sales meetings. However according to research, they are unable to properly execute those activities. To make the gap smaller more time should be dedicated on better training that is followed-up and the sales culture ought to be such that it motivates professional development. (Pullins & al. 2017.)

Customers' expect deeper connections and visionary approach from sales people especially in a B2B service and solutions sales. Combined with the customers' increased expectations in the sales person's ability to understand the customers' business on a high level this creates a challenging environment. Sales interactions with the customers are critical and they require good self-knowledge, knowledge of human nature and interpersonal skills in general. Instead of just going through benefits, features and advantages salespeople might be more focused on co-creating with the customer using a change-oriented sales process. Working together to understand the customer's current reality can lead to creating novel approaches for proceeding in the sales process instead of going through a rigid predetermined path. (Alamäki & Kaski 2017; Kaski, Hautamäki, Pullins & Kock, 2017.)

Commission-based compensation systems make work of the sales people visible and motivate them to pursue results. Number-centric management systems might lead to suboptimizing sales culture where meetings with customers' might be set-up just to meet meeting quotas. This in turn has the potential to leave customers disenchanted. Traditionally knowing if a sales person was working or not was nigh impossible for their supervisor to figure out in real time. This is especially true for travelling salesmen. Mobile online CRM-systems have made the sales process very transparent inside the companies that use them. As such it is theoretically easy for the managers to see who has put in a lot of work. Therefore, moving away from traditional compensation models is entirely possible. (Adams 2000, 148, 188; Harvard Business Review 2015a; Kaski & al. 2017; Manning & al. 2014, 384; Pullins & al. 2017.)

Some companies have moved to giving part of the compensation based on customer satisfaction surveys and retention of existing accounts. Others have given up on commission based salary altogether. Some Finnish IT-consultancy companies such as Reaktor and Nitor have given up on sales bonuses altogether or never had them to begin with. According to Reaktor this leads their sales people to focus on the quality and longevity of the partnerships with their clients instead of running after short-term successes. (Harvard Business Review 2015a; Reaktor 2014.)

3 Utilizing Psychological capital from a sales perspective

3.1 Positive psychology

Positive psychology is a branch of psychology which has its modern origins in 1998. That year Martin Seligman chose Positive psychology as the theme for his term as the president of the American Psychological Association (APA). Seligman gave a speech to the APA about his daughter – six years old at the time – Nikki who challenged his grumpiness by saying that she had decided not to whine after turning five and had succeeded. Nikki reasoned that if she could do that, surely Martin could do the same. This led Seligman to start focusing his research on nurturing and bettering in contrast to fixing wrongs and mending illnesses. Seligman felt that psychology had focused on making the lives of the troubled less troubled while giving the betterment of normal people little to no thought. This sentiment is echoed by the definers of Psychological capital., Luftans & Co. (Levene 2015, 9-11; Luthans, Youssef & Avolio, 2007a,p. 8-9; Seligman 2008, 9; TED 2004.)

3.2 Psychological capital

Psychological capital (PsyCap) is a higher-order psychological construct defined by Luthans, Youssef & Avolio in their book: Psychological capital, developing the human competitive edge.

Figure 1
Expanding capital for competitive advantage

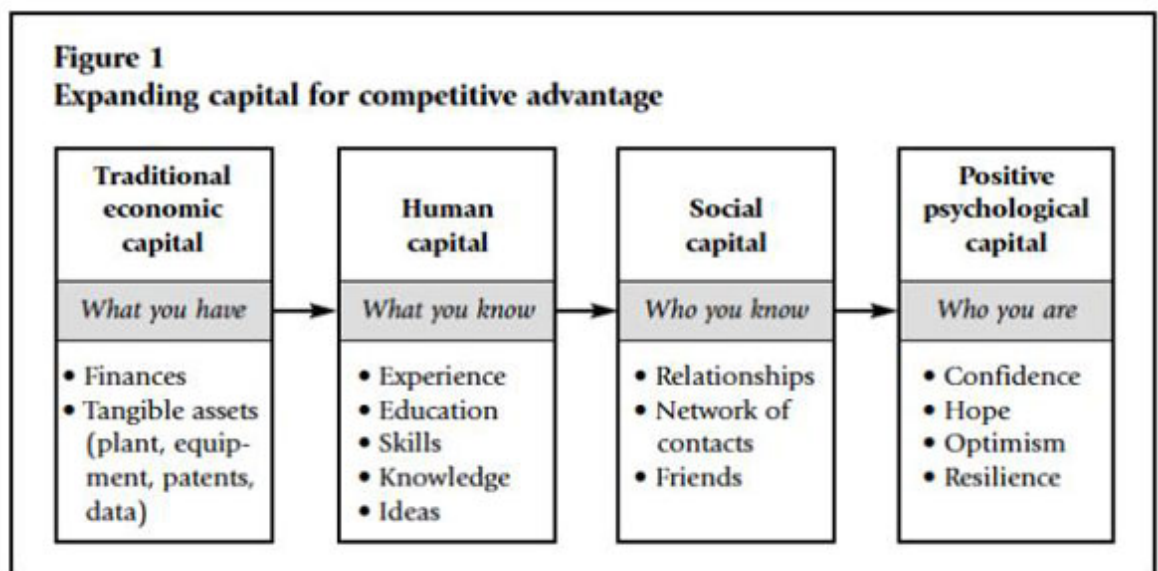| Traditional economic capital	Human capital	Social capital	Positive psychological capital
What you have	*What you know*	*Who you know*	*Who you are*
• Finances • Tangible assets (plant, equipment, patents, data)	• Experience • Education • Skills • Knowledge • Ideas	• Relationships • Network of contacts • Friends	• Confidence • Hope • Optimism • Resilience

Photo 1. Positive psychological capital in relation to other capital forces (Luthans, Luthans Luthans. 2004. 46. Business Horizons.)

PsyCap expands the traditional view of capital forces to a more personal level. Companies finances keep the business rolling (economic capital). These finances have been accrued by the combined efforts of talented and educated individuals (human capital). Sales

people of the firm leverage their vast networks to find leads and build rapport (social capital). PsyCap adds a human layer to the mix by taking in account who the person is.

PsyCap consists of four distinct elements: hope, efficacy, resilience and optimism – HERO for short. These elements are described by the authors like this:

> an individual's positive psychological state of development that is characterised by:(1) having confidence (**self-efficacy**) to take on and put in the necessary effort to succeed in challenging tasks; (2) making a positive attribution (**optimism**) about succeeding now and in the future; (3) persevering toward goals, and when necessary, redirecting paths to goals (**hope**) in order to succeed; and (4) when beset by problems and adversity, sustaining and bouncing back and even beyond (**resilience**) to attain success (Luthans, Youssef & Avolio, 2007 3).

These four elements can be identified individually but when developed and managed together they create something greater than the sum of their parts thus giving a bigger outcome together than when evaluated separately. The underlying basic level thread connecting HERO is defined as: "a positive appraisal of circumstances and probability for success based on motivated effort and perseverance" Per Luthans and Yousef-Morgan PsyCap resources are not fixed genetically hard-wired traits such as intelligence nor "pure" states such as pleasure and emotions. Instead these state-like resources are malleable and open for development. Empirical studies support this potential for development. Research also supports a positive link between Well-being and PsyCap. As such taking PsyCap to an account opens possibilities for the development of the skills and coping of salespeople. (Levene 2015, 29; Luthans, Youssef & Avolio 2007a, 14 -15, 19; Luthans, Youssef-Morgan, 2015, 183, 186.)

3.2.1 Hope

The PsyCap definition for hope is based on C. Rick Snyder's work. He defines hope as a positive motivational state that is based on sense of successful agency and planning to meet set goals. In short hope consists of will and a way. A person who answers yes to questions such as "Are you determined to achieve your goals? Do you feel you are in control of your own destiny? When there are no set goals for you, do you tend to set your own?" is exhibiting the will component of hope. (Luthans, Youssef & Avolio 2007a, 60 – 67; Luthans, Youssef-Morgan, 2015, 183, 186.)

A person who answers yes to questions like "Do you tend to figure out and evaluate alternative paths to the same destination? Do you have alternatives determined that can circumvent obstacles?" is exhibiting the pathways component of hope. (Luthans, Youssef & Avolio 2007a, 60 – 67; Luthans, Youssef-Morgan, 2015, 183, 186.)

Hope can be developed through individual goal setting, stretch goals, breaking difficult tasks in to smaller more manageable portions, empowering employees, providing the right amount of resources and by preparing for adverse outcomes in advance. Hope and performance have a well-established positive link. (Luthans, Youssef & Avolio 2007a, 60 – 68; Luthans, Youssef-Morgan 2015, 183, 186; Snyder 1999, 213-214.)

In this context resources include material resources, correct tools, information, and support from the organization. Without proper resources disengaged employees can become victimized by feeling that there is no way to do a properly good job. Hopeful employees are likely to become more frustrated than others without organizational support. (Luthans, Youssef & Avolio 2007a, 70.)

From an organizational standpoint, properly aligned reward systems play a significant role in reinforcing hope. Meta-analyses by Stajkovic & Luthans in 1997 and 2003 demonstrated that you get what you reinforce. In many reward systems, there is a disconnect between what people do and how they are recognized for their efforts. Such disconnect can have a negative impact on motivation, performance and hope. Rewarding both managers and employees for contributing to goals, setting and meeting self-set goals and for exhibiting internalized control have a positive effect on hope. Involving employees in decision making and goal setting has been linked to increased employee satisfaction, engagement and commitment. (Luthans, Youssef & Avolio 2007a, 69-72.)

3.2.2   Efficacy

The PsyCap definition for efficacy is based on Albert Bandura's research and social cognitive theory. Efficacy is defined by Stajkovic & Luthans as "one's belief about his or her ability to mobilize the motivation, cognitive resources and courses of action necessary to execute a specific action within a given context". The positive relationship between efficacy and performance is strongly supported by research. (Luthans, Youssef & Avolio 2007a, 33-40; Luthans, Youssef-Morgan, 2015, 180-181)

Efficacy is not about what one does but what one believes one can do. Efficacy is not an all-encompassing confidence in one's abilities. Efficacy is domain specific and previously

built confidence is not necessarily something that can be transferred to other domains. For example, one might be very good in one to one conversations but not a great public speaker. Efficacy can be developed through experiences of mastery and social persuasion. (Levene 2015, 19, 22-23; Luthans, Youssef & Avolio 2007a, 33-40; Luthans, Youssef-Morgan, 2015, 180-181)

People with high efficacy can be distinguished by: Setting high goals for themselves and self-selecting difficult tasks, welcoming and thriving on challenge, being highly self-motivated, investing the necessary effort to meet their objectives and by preserving when faced by obstacles. Highly efficacious people don't let repeated failure, negative feedback or self-doubt get them down. (Luthans, Youssef & Avolio 2007a, 33-40; Luthans, Youssef-Morgan, 2015, 180-181)

3.2.3 Optimism

In PsyCap optimism includes the typical definition of a positive outlook on current and expectancy of the future as well as an attributional style that seeks to internalize positive events and externalize negative events. In short someone with high optimism attributes positive events as personal, permanent and pervasive while seeing negative events as temporary, external and tied to certain situations. Optimism can be developed for instance by altering one's attributional style from negative to positive or enriching one's optimistic attributional style. Another way to directly affect optimism is by sharing relevant information when faced by a setback such as a bad sales quarter. A sales manager could for instance tell that the whole company was doing quite poorly due to wide economic turmoil and by pointing out that the salesperson is usually consistent with his results. **(**Luthans, Youssef & Avolio 2007a, 90-94; Luthans, Youssef-Morgan, 2015, 180-181)

3.2.4 Resilience

In PsyCap resilience is defined as: "the developable capacity to rebound or bounce back from adversity, conflict, failure, or even positive events, progress, and increased responsibility". It is based on clinical and developmental psychology and has been positively linked to workplace performance outcomes. An example of a positive event might be a record sales performance or a lottery win. Increased responsibility in this context means that a person with high resilience can rise higher than he was before the setback that he faced or come back down after an overwhelmingly positive event, returning to equilibrium. (Luthans, Youssef & Avolio 2007a, 111-116, 121-122; Luthans, Youssef-Morgan, 2015, 180-181)

Resilience can be developed by managing risks e.g. taking care of one's physical wellbeing or by developing skills through training, mentoring and job rotation to be able to take on the challenges ahead. Resilience can also be developed by focusing on processes by for instance learning a proper approach-coping technique. Approach-coping focuses on tackling the problem head-on and rising above and beyond. (Luthans, Youssef & Avolio 2007a, 124-126; Luthans, Youssef-Morgan, 2015, 180-181)

3.3 Coping

There are many definitions for coping in literature even though coping has been actively researched since the 1960s. According to C. Rick Snyder whose research has had a profound impact on PsyCap (Snyder 1999, 5) coping is "a response aimed at diminishing the physical, emotional, and psychological burden that is linked to stressful life events and daily hassles." To cope is to manage something successfully or to deal with difficult situations and acting to overcome them. Some attribute coping to preventing or diminishing threat, harm and loss while reducing the stress that is associated with it. Some researchers see coping as purely voluntary by nature, but others include automatic and involuntary responses as coping. These involuntary responses include defense mechanisms. In this research coping is handled as a conscious mechanism. (Aldwin 2007, 84-86, 98-101; Carver, Smith 2010, 684-685; Mauno, Rantanen & Tolvanen 2014, 189-190; Merriam-Webster 2017; Snyder 1999, 5-7;)

People cope differently with stress. These different styles have been studied and categorized into coping strategies. Hundreds of different strategies have been identified. The strategies that a person applies are determined partly by personality and partly by social environment. A person can choose a suitable coping strategy when immediately faced with a threat that they wish to remove. Alternatively, they can identify a potentially threatening situation and anticipate for it to happen, thus lowering the overall stressfulness of the situation or avoiding it altogether. Coping strategies are not equal in their effectiveness, some can have negative effects on well-being. The effectiveness of the coping strategy depends on how effective it is at reducing immediate distress and long-term effects such as mental well-being. For the purposes of this thesis a few of the most relevant coping groupings are presented. (Aldwin 2007, 98-100; Carver, Smith 2010, 687, 694-695; Snyder 1999, 9-10; Weiten, Dunn & Hammer 2015, 100-105.)

Table 1. Important distinctions and groupings of coping strategies according to Carver & Smith (Carver & Smith 2010, 685-687; Weiten, & al. 2015, 100-103)

Coping distinction	Description of the distinction	Example of how the strategy is utilized
Proactive coping	Being prepared for threats in the future and gathering resources to face them. Being able to avoid stressful situations.	Being well prepared for a sales meeting with a new client to avoid embarrassing situations and losing face.
Accommodative or **Meaning-focused coping**	**Accommodative**: Accepting changes, scaling back goals. **Meaning-focused**: Reordering life priorities, finding positives in everyday situations.	After losing my job due to the bankruptcy of my employer, I was reminded by the fact that I have a loving family – something that is truly precious.
Engagement vs. **disengagement coping**	**Engagement:** Support seeking, emotion regulation, acceptance and cognitive restructuring. **Disengagement:** Avoidance, denial and wishful thinking.	**Engagement**: After a stern discussion about my performance with my manager I go to my colleagues for support and advice on how to improve my sales numbers. **Disengagement**: After a stern discussion about my performance with my manager I go to see a movie and forget the discussion.
Problem-focused vs. **emotion-focused**	**Problem-focused:** Directly influencing the stressor by removing it or decreasing its influence. **Emotion-focused:** Minimizing the distress caused by stressors e.g. relaxing, crying, avoidance or mulling over.	**Problem-focused**: To avoid another stern discussion with my manager I go to courses to improve my sales skills. **Emotion-focused**: To soothe myself after a stern discussion with my manager I go practice yoga to relax my mind and body to alleviate my stress.

4   Methodology

Qualitative research methods were used to carry out this research. The method that was adapted for the purposes of this research was that of an exploratory case study. The analysed data was gathered using narrative interviews by the members of the Mania-research team. This chapter is focused on briefly comparing qualitative and quantitative research methods. A reasoning is given on why the qualitative research method was chosen for this research. Furthermore, the body of interviews, data collection and the processes used to analyse the data are explained.

4.1   Research methods

Qualitative and quantitative research are the most used and common types of research methods. The data collection process and the collected data are the two differing factors between the two methods. Qualitative research often seeks to gain in-depth understanding of a certain idea or phenomenon of complex nature examining the why and how something is done instead of just what, when or who. An example qualitative research might be interested in why people act in a certain way in fine restaurants compared to fast-food restaurants. Conversely quantitative research is focused on verifying and testing and overall being more select in the information gathered as it aims to gather measurable data. A fixed choice marketing survey sent to random sample of people is an example of quantitative research. (Biggerstaff 2012, 186-187; Ghauri & Grønhaug 1995, 85-86, 173.)

The research could have been carried out through a survey or similar quantitative method. However, this research does not aim to test any theories or hypotheses. Instead it aims to gain and broaden the understanding of the challenges that B2B-salespeople face in their daily work. An additional objective of this research is to contemplate if the development of PsyCap help salespeople to cope with setbacks. Therefore, the research was done utilizing qualitative methods by carrying out themed and narrative interviews. (Biggerstaff 2012, 186-188)

The number of interviews and companies analysed in this study is moderate and this can be considered as a limitation in this study. The questions asked in the interviews were not formulated with PsyCap in mind which also affects the solidity of the conclusions made from that perspective. However, answers to questions about stress and coping in sales work provide support for the theory in literature and give a deep first hand insight in to the daily struggles of salespeople. Effort is made to identify common pain points of sales people utilizing those insights.

4.2 Data collection and analysis

The data used in this thesis was collected through interviews conducted by researchers in the MANIA-research team. The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed by a professional transcription service. The interviews were 76 minutes long on average. The analysis in this thesis is based on the transcribed interviews using a content analysis method including seventeen (17) salesperson interviews in four (4) different companies.

Content analysis or thematic analysis can be used to quantify the occurrences of concepts that are picked to be examined. This approach to research is useful when summarisation and categorisation of themes that are encountered in data collection is the desired outcome. The data analysed can be in form of diaries, historical journals, video or interviews. Content analysis seeks to create a summary of the phenomenon that is being researched. Other usable content analysis methods might have been discourse analysis or even interpretative phenomenological analysis. Due to the limited scope of this study content analysis was chosen as it was perceived as the most effective form of data-analysis for this case. (Biggerstaff 2012, 178, 187-190; Tuomi & Sarajärvi 2002, 105-106.)

The companies in the research are international service providers who work in business-to-business environment and participate in the Mania – research project. All the interviewees are based in Finland and work closely with sales. The companies were all first contacted by the research team to poll their interest in the research project. After joining the project potential interviewees related to sales were mapped. The ones suitable for the research were contacted for a face-to-face interview. Locations and times were mutually agreed on beforehand. All the interviews analysed in this thesis were conducted at the interviewees offices.

The interviews themselves were narrative and themed to suit the interviewee's position and job description. Open-ended questions were used to entice the interviewees to give comprehensive answers. The questions were formed in a way that gave the interviewees a possibility to move the focus of the interview on the topics that they wanted to talk the most about.

Two types of questions were used, semi-structured and narrative. The questions were sub-categorized depending on the part of the interview in which they were asked. These categories were:

1. Beginning / Background
2. Examples
3. Feelings related to sales work
4. Themes
5. End

The structure given by these categories was used as a basis for all the interviews and was used in the same order each time.

The beginning consisted of informally gathering background information about the interviewee such as how long they had been working in the company and in sales in general. In the second part, the interviewees were asked to recall specific sales cases that had gone exceptionally well or poorly. The third part was focused on probing the interviewees' feelings on sales work in general. The fourth part of the interview was focused on theme questions such as: *What is important in selling?* The fifth part concluded the interview and the interviewee was asked if they had something to add or if there was something that should have been focused more in the interview.

Table two includes: fields of business of the interviewed companies, the positions the interviewed people held in the company and their title.

Table 2. List of interviewees

Company, Field of business	Position in the company	Company size	Interviewees title
Company A, B2B sales, technology	Director	Medium (100 – 500 employees)	Marketing and development director
Company A, B2B sales, technology	Salesperson	Medium (100 – 500 employees)	Consultant
Company A, B2B sales, technology	Salesperson	Medium (100 – 500 employees)	Account Manager
Company A, B2B sales, technology	Salesperson	Medium (100 – 500 employees)	Account Manager
Company A, B2B sales, technology	Director	Medium (100 – 500 employees)	Sales director

Company A, B2B sales, technology	Salesperson / support	Medium (100 – 500 employees)	Business Consultant
Company B, B2B sales, engineering	Salesperson	Large (Over 500 employees)	Account Manager 1
Company B, B2B sales, engineering/services	Salesperson	Large (Over 500 employees)	Account Manager 2
Company B, B2B sales, engineering/services	Director	Large (Over 500 employees)	Business Director
Company B, B2B sales, engineering/services	Salesperson / support	Large (Over 500 employees)	Service Manager
Company C, B2B sales, personnel services & outsourcing	Salesperson / support	Large (Over 500 employees)	Regional Manager
Company C, B2B sales, personnel services & outsourcing	Director / Sales-person	Large (Over 500 employees)	Service Director
Company C, B2B sales, personnel services & outsourcing	Directors	Large (Over 500 employees)	Vice President
Company C, B2B sales, personnel services & outsourcing	Salesperson	Large (Over 500 employees)	Account manager
Company D, B2B sales, consulting	Director	Small (Under 100 employees)	Chief Operative Officer
Company D, B2B sales, consulting	Salesperson	Small (Under 100 employees)	Sales manager
Company D, B2B sales, consulting	Salesperson	Small (Under 100 employees)	Key account manager

5   Results

This chapter presents answers to the research questions separately based on the insight drawn from the interviews. The excerpts from the interviews have been translated from Finnish to English.

5.1   What kind of pressures/stress do salespeople face and experience in their daily work?

To answer this question the key areas of stress and pressure that salespeople face and experience in their daily work were identified from the interviews and split into themes of stress / pressure. The definitions of the themes are derived from the interviews.

STRESS / PRESSURE	DEFINITION
Unclear metrics	Compensation is linked to complex metrics
Conflicts between quantity vs. quality	Work demands more quality but metrics focus on quantity
Demanding interactional work in face-to-face meetings	Building rapport with new and different customers is difficult.
Frustrating paperwork	Sellers do not see a lot of added value in extensive paperwork.
Keeping promises	Salesperson is the face of the sales organization, yet they lack executive authority.
Fear of failures	The blame of the failures is often solely carried by the salesperson.
Work-life balance	The balancing between private life and work.

Table 2. Sources of stress according to the interviewees

Unclear metrics

Key performance indexes (later KPI's) that are connected to compensation create pressure to some salespeople. KPI's within Company A were similar according to the interviewees. These include revenue within a specified time frame, profit margin, lead response time and number of meetings with customers. The timeframe of these metrics ranges from one week to a year. For Company C, most focus was put on the amount meetings. For company B and D, it was the amount of sales made in euros.

> "I am a quite a work-oriented person and I get stressed in a certain way. If I am given (sales related) targets in euros, then yes, I am under a tremendous amount of pressure. Since I am a perfectionist in a sense, [I feel that] I must meet those goals." (Company A, Business consultant, new to the company)

> "Understanding what the company demands of me is very important. My first six months working were very difficult. Now that I look back on that time [I am] wondering how could I have been so blind, I have come to realize that I didn't necessarily get what the management and the company were expecting of me. What are included in my tasks. I don't [know] why that is – was it me being young or so inexperienced or what but I just wandered from one customer to another small talking and that was that." (Company A, Account manager 1, over 10 years in the company)

Some of the interviewees new to the company felt that they had to reach their personal goals despite many of them not understanding the reasons behind them. This sentiment was echoed by senior salespeople who stated that during the first years of employment the reasons behind sales targets were not clear. It was also unclear if some new KPI's such as net promoter score influenced the metrics. The dissonance between failing to meet the metrics while having a feeling of success in day to day work causes problems and stress. Account manager at Company D felt that focusing purely on the amount of sales in euros instead of also looking at profitability was a silly practice that puts focus on the wrong issues.

> "Today there are no so called easy cases any more. Or there are, but practically speaking a salesperson is not able to reach their goals with them." (Company A, Account manager 2)

Some negativity related to metrics stems from the fact that doing badly in metrics can send the wrong kind of message to the rest of the organization. An example of this was given by Consultant from Company A who is working with new kind of business for the company. Metering this new business is bit of a challenge as it is more abstract than the company's traditional business. As such the metrics are not as strong as with the already established business units. According to the Consultant this causes "a need to prove my existence to the rest of the organization daily".

According to the interviewees there is a strong link between compensation and metrics in the sales organizations. Senior salespeople did not see this as problem, on the contrary they thought that a systematic approach is required to make anything substantial happen.

Some salespeople in Company A felt that the compensation model is complicated which leads to frustration, stress and suboptimization, drawing salespeople's focus away from what is most beneficial to their employer.

Some companies like Company C make an active effort through sales management to make sure that their salespeople do not just meet with the same clients repeatedly to avoid suboptimizing. Vice President of Company C on measuring sales activity:

> "…So that you don't end up working with the ten clients that you already have and like to work with and meet them pretty much every week, looking like you are one of our most active salespeople in the company… We monitor, lead, guide and kick salespeople to continuously focus on new clients." (Company C, Vice President)

Other negative aspects related to metrics included disrupting effect on collaboration within the sales organization and focus on individuality. The fact that as much as five to six people can be working on a sales project together yet the metrics are focused on individuals creates a false sense of solidarity. A few accounts were made about the fact that if a salesperson sells something that they are not measured for, they won't receive a sales provision on the sale.

Conflicts between quantity vs. quality

There were a few interviewees that spoke of the possibly negative impacts of measuring quantity instead of quality. Business consultant from company A felt there were many who did not share their ideology of focusing on quality and deep understanding of the customers' needs instead of complete focus on pure quantity of sales. The focus on quantity was seen by some of the interviewees as a large source of stress due to difficulty in booking meetings with potential customers with whom substantial deals could be made in the first place.

> "Sometimes I feel that the amount which is being measured …. is the thing that takes the center stage in a sense that now you should focus on quantity and number of visits, these sort of things, and I am not saying that they are not important but sometimes it maybe feels that it is in a too big of a role." (Company A, Account manager 2)

> "It is in my nature to stress. It might be that I stress some sales meeting and think about something. ..That and the fact that a pressure is constantly build for us to

reach a certain quantity of sales each month. I think about that somewhat, I guess my stress level is quite high." (Company B, Account Manager 1)

Sales manager at Company D felt that the companies focus on quantity is a bad thing since it motivates people to run after the money generated from new customers instead of building lasting relationships with existing customers. The fact that that building relationships is not rewarded can be discouraging. As the Sales Manager says: "I take the risk but I am not really rewarded for it."

An example of the battle between quantity and quality is how leads are generated. According to the interviews leads should be worked on the same day they are received. Yet there are big differences on the quality of the leads. A lead with a small potential impact on the compensation of a salesperson requires the same steps taken as one with a large potential. Feelings such as fear of increased amount of work with no guarantees of it amounting to increased salary and doubts of being able of the handle all the work currently on their plate, were voiced by the interviewees.

Another example of focus on quantity over quality was given by Account manager 1 of Company A. A customer had misunderstood the account managers message and it led to a complaint which led to the sales organization losing some money. The message in question was hastily written due to rush the account manager was in.

Demanding interactional work in face-to-face meetings

> "F2F time is extremely important, but booking the time has become more difficult."
> (Company A, Sales director)

All the interviewees agreed on the importance of face to face meetings in sales work. Many interviewees stated that it is important to perform well in them due to their importance in building rapport and joint understanding with the customer. Face-to-face meetings are a multifaceted source of stress according to the interviewees. Sources include identifying the right people to meet, booking the meetings, traveling and performing well at the meetings.

> "The meetings are harder to book, they need to be scheduled further away in to the
> future, there are more cancelations and the meetings are shorter." (Company A, Account manager 2)

> "No one can say that it [booking F2F-meetings] is really fun. It is a totally shitty thing to do, call and impose yourself on the client but it is part of the job." (Company C, Vice President)

> "… or I have some sort of a forced assignment where I have to go to somewhere far away for a meeting in a bad weather. I have noticed that while driving, I am afraid for that journey. I do not like [going there] and it leads to a negative result." (Company A, Account manager 1)

Additional stress is generated from booking competitions that some of the companies employ due to the perceived need to perform well in the competition.

According to the interviewees successful face to face meetings attribute to gaining allies within the buyer organization. Sales people are often alone against a superior number of people from the customer organization, and it can be difficult to identify the most important influencers in such situations. Finding the right people in the buyer organization can sometimes take months or years which can be taxing.

> "It felt like we were hitting our heads against a wall, since we did not find the right person. And when we found the correct person we got a step or two forwards. Then we took a few steps back. That highlighted our grit. Now we have tried to identify the buying influencers, people that we need to be in good terms with. Now to our horror we noticed that according to our customer the whole project is led by a person who is totally unknown to us." (Company A, Account manager 1)

According to the interviewees there are times when the buyers seem to have hidden motives behind their decisions. As Consultant from Company A said, "Rarely does anyone say that "I am afraid that your solution might leave me without a job."" Inability to identify these motives in face-to-face meetings can lead to frustrating failures. In an extreme example, the buyer might be colluding with the old vendor making the tendering procedure nothing more than a smokescreen to hide unethical behaviour of the buyer.

A strong influencer within the company might turn a positive sales case in to a failure as exampled here by Account manager 2 from Company B:

> "…One influencer with a bad experience who has not even seen our concept or heard about it might know one part of the solution and they might tell everyone that part of the solution absolutely sucks." (Company B, Account manager 2)

After the meeting sales people need to do paperwork and make sure that the appropriate steps are taken in accordance to what has been decided in the meeting.

Frustrating paperwork

Filling up paperwork and other administrative tasks were mentioned by two account managers as one of the top negative aspects in their job.

> "What is the most draining aspect of your work [in saleswork]? Well I would say, back office, certain reporting, [like] those regular contrived processes where you input some sort of a number once a month or you deliver a report to a customer. On top of that typical admin stuff like travelling expenses, kilometres etc. are the type of stuff that end up pending. Before I absolutely must do them, I really don't want to touch them." (Company A, Account manager 1)

In company A there is a process which should be used when contacting the customers. This includes filling up certain fields in the company's CRM within a certain timeframe after meetings and other forms of contact with the customer. One account manager told that he does not use the process because he does not think that it is the best way to do his job, nor does he see the amount of added value that the upper management sees in the process. As a result, he feels that he approaches his customers incorrectly and his behaviour causes friction between him and his superior.

The frustration towards paperwork is felt on all levels according to the interviews. When asked about the most frustrating thing in his work, Sales director from company A talked about European processes and excels and how they could be leaner and more user friendly. Similar pains were felt in Company D as well.

Keeping promises

Most of the interviewees talked about the importance of being able to deliver on promises in timely fashion. Many interviewees feel they need to get their promises delivered before they can leave work, which can lead to long days. Not being able to do so was linked to feeling guilt or a sense of failure.

> "If I promise something to the customer I always aim to deliver. I feel guilty if I fail to deliver on my promises. I can't go on my summer holidays or start my weekend unless things that I have started during the week are finished." (Company A, Account manager 1)

Some of the interviewees told that they felt responsible for the failures of the rest of the organization while others focused solely on their own efforts. This can be illustrated by these quotes:

> "You have to delegate things and you have to make sure the person you have delegated it to actually delivers what was promised. If that does not happen, it is you who must answer to the customer and indicate that you have not done your job properly" (Company A, Account manager 1)

> "If someone else fails to do something it is not my fault because I have not done anything wrong, right? Why would I feel bad about it?" (Company A, Business consultant.)

Differences between perspectives can lead to conflicts within the sales organization according to the interviews. This is highlighted by the fact that salespeople lack the power to direct other important stakeholders inside the seller company. As an example, a salesperson can promise a certain time of delivery for the product. Due to lack of urgency in the sales company's logistics department this promise is broken. The consequences of the broken promise are felt on the shoulders of the salesperson even if they did everything by the book. Having to double check everything can be a heavy burden.

> "Everything has been checked numerous times to make sure [that everything is as planned] and I have had to lose my temper inside my company at my own people many times, [asking] why you are not doing things and why aren't things advancing." (Company A, Account manager 1)

> "I try to get everything done as far as I can and I am really pissed off at people who do not do what they have promised to do and do not even try to explain why the fail to follow through. This is largely teamwork and there can be times where five people are working as hard as they can, while one person is slacking off and it can cause the work of those five people to go to waste… Those are truly depressing moments…Especially when I do not have a direct superiority over anyone and in virtual teams trying to get your colleague to do something is not the most fun thing to do." (Company A, Consultant)

> "…if our process would have worked like it should our [service] promises would have probably been met. The mistakes of the rest of the organization can ruin a good follow-up sale potential." (Company A, Sales director)

The lack of joint understanding especially in large complex sales cases can lead to promises being broken. If the customers' pains are not understood inside the sales organization the salesperson can find themselves fiercely defending the customer, leading to conflicts with their colleagues. This is especially true in large sales cases where the salesperson has a lot at stake in terms of compensation.

> "Lack of communication with the customer and within our own organization… and then maybe, the fact that something that was promised to be delivered never happened due to holidays or other things. I do not like to [say] that because they are excuses. It was poorly executed and that's it." Company A, Sales Director

Fear of failures

> "You have to make 3800 calls before making one sale." (Company A, Sales Director)

Making a deal happen takes a lot of effort according to all the interviewees. There was also an understanding that selling has become more difficult in the age of the Internet and that this leads to more failures. Failing was seen as a natural part of sales work by the interviewees. Regardless there were many accounts of it causing pain and distress.

> "If it comes suddenly out of nowhere that there is not going to be a deal. If you are not at all prepared it can be really bummer." (Company A, Account manager 1)

> "…Social skills are needed calm the customer after something like an installation that does not necessarily even have anything to do with me occurs and the customer calls me." (Company B, Account manager 2)

A few of the interviewees talked about failures being especially hard to deal with when they were near a quarters end because of the link between compensation and closing deals.

Some of the companies hold weekly meetings where the sales team comes together. In these meetings matters such as failures to meet the weekly metrics are discussed which creates a pressure on the salespeople to constantly do well. An example of this was told by the Vice President of Company C. The company holds weekly sales meetings and even though their intention is not to berate people for bad performance getting asked "if someone else should do the booking for you?" does not lead "to many people wanting to have the same experience in the next meeting".

> "When [sales performance] is discussed, although you [an underperforming sales-person] are not exactly berated and the focus is on going through the fact that on this week you have a really small amount of meetings…It can't be that hard, does someone else have to book the meetings for you or what? Not many sales people want to go through that in the next meeting." (Company C, Vice President)

A point was also raised about the fact that even a small failure of a single salesperson can have vast negative impact on the brand of the whole company. Small failures include coming late to a meeting, being unprepared, saying something out of line or lying to the customer to save face. The fear of losing face is said to have impacts such as unwilling-ness to let someone else take a customer over where the salesperson is unable to create a good rapport with the customer.

The responsibility over making things work as promised and retaining current customers is largely felt on the shoulders of the salespeople according to the interviewees, even though there are many other aspects that can lead the customer relationship to fail.

Work-life balance

> "Stress is maybe the biggest thing that I dislike in my job. Sometimes I am forced to think about how nice it would be a technician, just whistling away. When I would go home I would not need to think about [work] matters which is something I need to do in this job." (Company B, Account manager)

According to the interviewees customers are less eager to spend time outside of work hours – something that is still brought up as an important source for building rapport with the customer. One account manager told that he offers to take his customers child along with the customer to a hockey game or similar family friendly activity. This eases up the tensions with the families especially when the account manager himself takes his child with him to the activity.

> "You got to notice the whole squad, which the customer is thinking about because nowadays family has a bigger role in the lives of buyers and sellers. You can't just take up and leave for Levi for a week anymore, or the lady will start sulking." (Company A, Account manager 2)

Sales directors from Company A told in the interviews that meeting people outside of work hours and on the weekends, is still expected to some extent from their subordinates. The

company also supports working late according to a few account managers. This has created pressure to work late while making them feel anguish over the fact that many of their colleagues only work regular hours.

> "I jokingly call some people eight-to-four workers. I do not mean any disrespect just that, when they have not had sales goals before, now they do. It is extremely easy for them to say that, 'hey it is 16.15 I am going home. See you tomorrow'. However, a salesperson cannot do that, if there is a problem and maintenance is not there, someone must go there… Getting people inside the company to understand my pain and my problem is what I am trying to solve. So that everyone would be working in tandem and be inspired." (Company A, Account manager 1)

There were also examples of family life influencing the work of the interviewees. Arguing at home can carry over and have a detrimental impact on their performance while increasing the overall stress-level of their daily work.

5.2 How are setbacks dealt within sales organizations?

To answer this question the ways to cope with setbacks within organizations were categorized and split to three levels: Organizational / Leadership, colleagues and personal.

5.2.1 Organizational / Leadership level

There was very little talk in the interviews about how the companies' processes handle with failures. A few themes rose from the leadership level that have an impact on how setbacks are handled within the organizations. In this context leaders are all employees with managerial duties be it on a team or a higher level.

Leaders empowering their employees

> "Then I like to give people the choice to do things themselves. I try to empower people in a way that it stays in a sensible scale. I have noticed that when you are personally able to affect something then the level of commitment is on a way better level." (Company A, Sales Director)

Based on the interviews there is a tendency for salespeople to work quite independently. This is also evident in the fact that leaders tend to give the power of day to day decisions to the employees themselves. For example, after Account manager 1 from Company A

had a case of miscommunication with the customer he could solve the situation by reimbursing the customers next bill. He did not need to ask for permission first as he was empowered to make the decision himself.

Leaders caring for their employees

> "On principle, I am always available and interested on what people are doing."
> (Company A, Sales Director)

According to the interviews leaders tend to look out for their underlings. Being observant and available for discussion helps in unwinding stressful situations. If a salesperson is faced with a string of failures for, the leader notices the situation and helps to get them back on track. This is done through motivational speaking and encouragement.

In company C effort is made to identify what motivates each salesperson. The way people are led and cared for is customized accordingly. Some might need more pats on the back after a setback while others might be more responsive to so called tough love.

5.2.2   Colleagues

In this context colleagues are other employees that work with or within sales inside the interviewees' companies.

Atmosphere of sharing

> "Being able to honestly deal with them [mistakes] and disassemble the case to see what went wrong. Without judging anyone. That is real learning maybe. If you are afraid of the mistake then you often end up not doing something because you do not want to fail, because you are condemned in someone's eyes." (Company A, Account manager 2)

According to the interviews being able to be open about failures and successes is something that helps to deal with setbacks in daily work. Being able to share everything from wins to losses was appreciated by the interviewees as they often contain learning experiences while simultaneously unloading the mental baggage of the person sharing them.

> "We go things through [with my colleagues], of course. And yes, the sort of one supporting another atmosphere is good, since it is sort of linked with the work community. Therefore, it is important that you can talk with your colleagues and examine

things and state that this [setback] happened and then move onwards to new adventures." (Company A, Consultant)

Question: "How do you get over a setback and get back to full speed?" Answer: "By swearing. I need to go over the situation with my colleagues as fast as possible. Let all the big Finnish swearwords properly come out, while thinking about why this happened." (Company A, Account manager 1)

5.2.3   Personal

Personal includes the individual coping mechanisms of the interviewees'.

Setbacks as a learning experience

"Before I always asked [from the customer] why we got beaten here and then I strived to not get beaten for the same reason again. At least not for the same reason. Nowadays I take it at face value like, okay, we took a beating here, let us see what we can learn from this to avoid repeating the same thing and next time we will do things better." (Company A, Sales Director)

According to the interviews many of the salespeople see failures as a natural part of sales work and have chosen to use these failures to their advantage instead of mulling over them. The causes for failures are either deduced by the salespeople or asked directly from the customer. Most of the interviewees told that they try to remember not to do the same mistake again after learning what they have done wrong. The lessons are shared from time to time with colleagues.

"…[Customers challenging feedback] can open new worlds and we can build something quite special and new. It makes sense to gather feedback but you should not mull over it too much." (Company A, Business Consultant)

One great example of turning a setback in to a learning experience was told by Account manager 1 (later in AM1 in this paragraph) from Company A. He had been working on a case for a long time with a promising prospective customer. AM1 was quite certain that he would succeed in the new sale. Out of the blue the customer told that they had chosen some other company to buy from. At first AM1 was furious and tried to gather new information but received none. After a few months of cooling down AM1 called his contact from

the buyer's side to ask about what had happened. He received a wealth of useful information to improve his work and could form a strong bond with the contact from the buyer's side, likely to convert in to a new selling opportunity in the future according to the AM1.

Focusing on the positives

Based on the interviews victories both big and small have a positive impact on dealing with stress, pressures and potential setbacks in daily work. According to Account manager 2 from Company A getting a sale done generates energy that lifts the mood high. On the flipside when he faces setbacks he tries to focus on the positives by having faith in himself and trusting in his ability to recoup his losses in the future.

Some of interviewees focused on positives even after the customer was displeased with their company. Instead of feeling bad for the collective failure of the company they would try to shift the conversation with the customer towards a solution.

Account manager 1 from Company A once got yelled and threatened by the customer at a sales meeting. He was told upfront that they had received a great offer from another company. Instead yelling back, he decided to focus on the positives leading him to ultimately close the deal with the customer turning a stressful situation in to a victory:

> "It really helped me when I reacted to his demeanour in a soft-spoken manner and started taking the conversation towards making the customer realize that they should listen to me."

Another way of building strength from successes was illustrated by Business consultant from Company A who managed to get closer to a sale after a long process with the customer and was then faced with additional tough questions by the customer related to the customer's core business. The Business consultant was able to answer the question and received an answer from the customer saying that that their answer was "On point!"

> "Being able to influence customers' business processes with your own professional opinion is quite rewarding." (Company A, Business Consultant)

Account manager from Company C on how he gets himself pumped up to keep on calling after getting stressed by calling a few times and not getting a meeting booked:

> "*I have sometimes told my colleagues that first you should go smile at yourself in the*

mirror a few times, then notice how great I am and say hello to myself. My mood might completely reverse when I see a happy fellow saying hello to me. You automatically start smiling after that." (Company C, Account manager)

Balance from leisure time

> Interviewer's question: How do you bounce back from setbacks? Answer: "I do not really dwell on them. I carry them around for a while and I am a bad loser so it stings for a moment. But then the balance from leisure time and hobbies kicks in…Yeah it comes from my family and sport and things like that, they are the once that you just got to find your balance with." (Company A, Consultant)

According to the interviews leisure time and family play a big role in balancing out the setbacks at work. Spending time with the family and children, running, listening to music and other hobbies were mentioned in the interviews as ways of keeping up a positive attitude and bouncing back after setbacks.

Some of the interviewees' have locked certain times for their family or hobbies to keep their work hours sensible thus helping them to maintain their composure under stress in the long run. Many of the interviewees' felt it was very important to keep the balance in a way that allows for some days to go longer when the customer needs it while being able to go home earlier on other days.

An example of how the family dynamic can make the problems at work seem less important was given by Account manager 2 from Company A:

> "Understanding the whole machinery, the closest ones around you, if you need to pick your child up from the daycare before five, it does not matter one bit what someone is saying out there. You still need to pick up your child before five."

Account manager 2 added that to be able to do this without a conflict he has talked about his priorities with his managers and he has been given a permission to tend to his paternal duties. This has helped him prioritize and uphold the balance that helps him overcome challenges.

Relief valves

According to the interviews a quite common way to cope with setbacks is by letting the pressure out as soon as possible. Ways of relieving stress this way include listening to music on a loud volume, yelling, swearing or going on a run.

Self-knowledge

Based on the interviews perceiving things with a positive mind-set by utilizing past experiences helps to cope with setbacks in sales work. For people with a lot of experience from sales this can be as easy as knowing that by persevering through enough calls and meetings will eventually end up in successful sales. Self-confidence was called a precious resource for salespeople by some of the interviewees.

> "*I have sometimes told my colleagues that first you should go smile at yourself in the mirror a few times, then notice how great I am and say hello to myself. My mood might completely reverse when I see a happy fellow saying hello to me. You automatically start smiling after that.*" (Company C, Account manager)

According to the interviews some of the salespeople are motivated by money but this is not the case for everyone. Instead of focusing on the metrics some of the interviewees create their own definitions of success that they strive to fulfill. Even when the salesperson has failed in the eyes of the organization – for example by not fulfilling their sales quota – they can feel a sense of accomplishment through their own definition of success.

> "Material profits are important but they are no longer the only drivers that move me forwards…. I have been setting the metrics myself in previous organizations as a manager…. so, I do not really care anymore…. I don't view them as the most important issue in my life." (Company A, Consultant)

6   Discussion

The aim of this thesis was to explore the sources of stress and setbacks of B2B-salespeople and how they and their organization copes with them. Additional question about the potential use of psychological capital (PsyCap) in dealing with setbacks is handled here. This section includes conclusions and findings drawn from the research data. Suggestions for further areas of research are also brought forth.

Cultural difficulties related to how much salespeople ought to spend time working outside of traditional work hours seems to create some cultural issues.

6.1   Conclusions

Based on the interviews sales organizations do not seem to have a lot of formal ways of dealing with setbacks. Instead most coping seems to happen on the team level and seems to be engagement focused. Support is sought from colleagues without any formal process in an organic fashion. To improve equality of access to support between teams and individuals it might be beneficial to create some agreed upon processes. This way emotional support is not limited to those that happen to have like-minded colleagues. Managers could be advised to be more open about the fact that they are willing to discuss setbacks.

The PsyCap definition of Hope is based on C. Rick Snyder's work. Hope consists of will and way. A person that answers yes to a question like: "When there are no set goals for you, do you tend to set your own?" is exhibiting the will component of hope. The way part is focused on questions like "Do you tend to figure out and evaluate alternative paths to the same destination?". Based on the interviews salespeople often set their own goals even if there are goals set for them. They also tend to plan alternative routes to reach their goals in face of setbacks. Increasing Hope in salespeople could be attained by empowering them further. Many accounts were made about the fact that the company culture is often too restricting to enable a creative approach to situations.

Another aspect of sales work that was widely deemed restricting was the necessity of extensive paperwork. The interviewees did not see a lot of added value in the reporting. A more leaner way of documentation might lead to less frustration and stress while letting the salespeople focus more time on what they enjoy doing – which according to the interviews was closing deals.

According to the interviews there is a clear need for the increase of qualitative performance measurement amidst salespeople. Some companies have started using qualitative metrics but their meaning is somewhat poorly communicated to the salespeople and in most cases no reward systems are linked to them. This seems to cause disengagement in salespeople. Meta-analyses by Stajkovic & Luthans (1997 & 2003) demonstrated that you get what you reinforce. Disconnect between what people do and how they are recognized for their efforts can have a negative impact on motivation, performance and the PsyCap of Hope. Changing to a culture that appreciates quality over quantity while increasing the level of communication and transparency might improve the level of engagement from salespeople.

According to literature number-centric management systems might lead to salespeople setting up meetings just to meet meeting quotas and that face to face meetings. The interviews revealed that there is merit to this claim.

Adams (2000) states that a good way to motivate salespeople is through shaming those that have failed to meet minimum quotas. The study supports the fact that this practice is still used. Large portion of the interviewees considered reaching quotas to be stressful. The PsyCap definition of optimism attributes positive events as personal and negative events as temporary, external and tied to certain situations. Optimism can be developed by framing negative events in a different light. By focusing on the fact that a person who did poorly in one quarter usually performs well increases positivity and through that the overall psychological capital. Increased psychological capital has a positive effect on performance according to Luthans, Youssef & Avolio (2007). Therefore, shaming poorly performing salespeople might be something that companies should reconsider doing.

According to The Hofstede Centre (2015a) Finland is a rather feminine country from the point of view of Hofstede's cultural dimensions theory. People of feminine countries are more interested in collaboration than competing. According to the OECD report (2012) on the Finnish education system *"expert thinking, complex communication and creative problem solving can only flourish when collaboration is maximised and competition is minimised."* Based on the interviews the sales culture in the B2B-companies does not share this mode of thinking. Sales competitions are held and compensation is mostly designed to reward individual performance over teams. In some cases, unclear metrics drive people to work alone since benefiting the company is not necessarily in their financial interests. Shifting to a more compensation system that encourages collaboration might help to create a better sales culture.

6.2   Follow-up research suggestions

The scope of this thesis was limited since the interviews had been done beforehand and were mostly focused on selling. The interviews included no questionnaires related to PsyCap which means that no definitive assessment could be done about the level of PsyCap possessed by the salespeople. Similarly coping was not on the forefront of the questions being asked.

Research could be done from the point of view of PsyCap where salespeople would first be evaluated for their levels of different aspects of PsyCap. Background information such as sale performance would also be gathered. Then some of the salespeople would be trained increase their level of PsyCap. After some time, the evaluation would be done again to see if there had been improvements in the level of aspects of PsyCap and sales performance.

Another interesting research subject could be done by comparing different sales organizations in their ability to support sales people to face setbacks. Best practices and insights in to company culture could be attained from this.

Focusing on one big company in a similar research could bring forth differences and similarities between different parts of the sales organization depending on where and what the salespeople are selling. An international variant could be conducted to compare different sales organizations of the same company in different countries.

7   Evaluation

This chapter is focused on the writing process of the thesis. First, we go through the progression and the timeline of the thesis. After this the learning process related to the thesis is described.

7.1   Progression of the thesis

The making of the thesis officially started in March 2015. During the summer of 2015 a rough vision of what I wanted to achieve with the thesis was formed. There was a lot of talk and iteration related to the thesis from the very start of the process. Due to some delay in receiving materials to analyse I ended up focusing solely on work for a few months. I ended up landing a long internship at a company and decided to postpone doing my thesis after I ended working there. Unfortunately for my thesis I landed a fulltime job as a People Ops Specialist and again decided to postpone working on my thesis. My advisor thankfully understood my position.

In Autumn of 2016 I decided it was time to finalize my thesis and I started to work on it in the weekends. During January of 2017 my work intensified to a point where I was working on my thesis a several days a week. We set a deadline of March 2017 for my thesis with my advisor.

7.2   Learning process

When I received the research question from my advisor I was instantly hooked. Being able to read through actual accounts from salespeople was really exhilarating. Reading the interviews has helped me a lot in my life and learning how to work in a company full of specialists. Even though getting the thesis done took longer than I would have wanted, working widened my understanding of the subject matter of the thesis and matured me a lot as a person. Learning about agile methods helped me tackle this huge challenge.

I am extremely proud of what I have managed to achieve and very thankful to everyone that supported me through my journey.

I am seriously considering about applying to a master's programme in the future so I can delve deeper in to research – without work distracting me this time I promise!

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