UNIVERSITY OF EASTERN FINLAND
Faculty of Social Sciences and Business Studies
Business School

THE IMPACT OF CULTURAL DIVERSITY AND SELLERS INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION COMPETENCE ON BUSINESS - TO - BUSINESS (B2B) SALES PROCESS
Qualitative case study

Master’s thesis
International Business and sales Management
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ABSTRACT
UNIVERSITY OF EASTERN FINLAND
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OSSAI UCHE A:
Master’s Thesis: The impact of cultural diversity and seller’s intercultural communication competence on international business-to-business (B2B) sales process.
Supervisor: University Lecturer, PhD Jonna Koponen
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Key words: Cultural diversity, intercultural communication competence, international b2b sales process.

The aim of this study is to investigate salesperson understanding and expectation of international b2b sales process. In additions, this study aims at investigating on how salesperson conduct b2b international sales process when cultural diversity between seller and buyer is high or low. In addition, it should investigate how salesperson intercultural communication competence affects the sales process when cultural diversity between seller and customer is high or low.

Several business scholars have previously researched international b2b sales process phenomenon. A recent rise in the study of cultural diversity and seller’s intercultural communication competence on international sales process reflects challenges encountered by salesperson. This study has acquired less attention by previous scholar due to less research previously done.

The theoretical aspects, presents framework and propositions for the later empirical part. The research is a single case study of the chosen Finnish firm. The empirical part contributes to the international b2b sales literature by strengthening its earlier findings and providing new insights. The case firm X truly represent the characteristics of international b2b sales process based on its selection. The firm operate in various business environments and their customers vary from giant multinational forest machine corporations to everyday consumers.

The approach used to conduct the study is qualitative. There were five salespeople interviewed for this study. Face to face, interview was conducted via Skype. The data received from interviews, transcribed, coded and analyzed with qualitative content analysis. Lastly, the empirical part indicates that there are several ways to establish international b2b sales process relationships with customers, which implies that salesperson, requires lots of skills, knowledge and attitude and motivation to maintain and develop these relationships.
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3
1 INTRODUCTION

The aim of the study is to understand how cultural diversity and seller’s intercultural competence influence on the implementation of international b2b sales process. Sellers and firms need to understand the complexities of cultural diversity and the challenge of seller’s intercultural communication competence that emerge because of international b2b sales process implementation. In order for sellers and firms to understand international b2b sales process, sellers must first acknowledge the prevailing challenges associated with cultural diversity and intercultural communication competence displayed during international b2b sales process, which has challenging results.

1.1 Background.

Sellers conducting international sales process requires an understanding of cultural diversity and intercultural communication competence for successful implementation of international b2b sales process, but how these steps are being implemented during international b2b sales process would depend on salesperson level of available skills, knowledge and attitude/motivation. Furthermore, firms need to understand how buyer-seller interaction are effectively conducted by salesperson and be aware of the exiting differences in cultural diversity that exist as a result of international b2b sales process interactions.

According to (Hall 1976) suggestions on two categories of cultural diversity, which includes low context culture and high context culture. Shared experiences entails information about explicit or implicit form of high or low context cultures. (Hall, 1976) stated that the degrees to which information exchange is explicit or implicit is a result of shared experiences and assumptions that transmits from verbal and nonverbal codes to specify meaning. (Hall, 1976) confirms that in high context culture, relationships must be built on trust and can be built up slowly and stable with the two parties establishing first a common focus on their identity, such as (family, culture, work) in order to understand each other.

Several model related to intercultural communication competence suggest the need for skills, knowledge, attitude and motivation, that are applicable for international business-to-business sales process. Having a knowledge and communication skill of other languages enhances seller’s competence. (Spitzberg & Changnon, 2009) confirm that the intercultural speaker is one who can mediate on language differences between two cultures during sales interaction. His/her ability to skillfully negotiate sales between two different cultures during international b2b sales situations is
key to the performance of effective intercultural communication competence (Spitzberg & Changnon, 2009).

Consistency of skills refers to a steady attitude of a salesperson, which also reflects in active performances from sales activities (Elo et al, 2015). (Elo et al, 2015) confirmed that individuals express consistency in any given situation to reflect a sense of motivation. Lastly, another theory related to international b2b sales process proposes the seven steps of selling which is the central focus of this research. (Moncrief & Marshall, 2005) proposed the implementation of the seven steps of sales process which includes the following steps: The first is the need for prospecting which is the first step to searching for customers secondly, the need for pre-approach which is the second step to familiarizing with customer’s needs. The third is approach to customers by salespersons on first interactions with customers, for example the initial handshake and small talks with customers. Presentation deals with the actual content of sales discussion whiles, overcoming objections, relates to questions raised by a buyer and how salespersons addresses it. (Moncrief & Marshall, 2005) explained that closing the deals is the sixth step that determines that a successful sale would either be made or not. Lastly, the follow-up step is described by how services rendered to customers conforms to sales promises; this final step is where the salesperson get feedbacks.

Sellers are required to possess skills, knowledge, attitude/motivation that would enable them carry out international sales process appropriately. For example, sellers need to understand how to code nonverbal communication and understand what certain gestures means. Salespersons understanding of time, as a factor in business negotiation is needful. Seller’s needs to understand what punctuality or lateness means in diverse cultures and exhibit competence in dealing with time differences

1.2 Research Gap and problems

Research gap and problem aims at investigating salespersons understanding about international b2b sales process. International b2b sales process reflects on the experiences of salesperson from new business environment.

International b2b sales process are characterized by changes and challenges confronted by sellers in new national culture. (Schultz et al, 1999) confirms that in order for salesperson to respond to the challenges and changing nature of international b2b sales process with a new culture, he/she has to focus appropriately on sales relationship development, opportunities and survival tactics in new volatile business environments. Sellers should be able to ascertain how to confront these existing challenges and changes in a competent manner. Competence exhibited by sellers during buyer-seller
interactions within a new culture enable the seller understand how to communicate, understand the challenges and changes that exist in new culture. (Schultz et al, 1999) confirms that key approach to international b2b sales success is determined by the ability of a salesperson to establish and sustain international b2b sales relationships within a buyer’s culture.

The aim of this research is to study cultural diversity and intercultural communication competence from the perspective of international b2b sales process. (See for example Hall, 1976; Berthoin and Friedman, 2005) they provide information about how cultural diversity and intercultural communication competence affects international b2b sales process. The case company showed lack of structure and process of international b2b sales process. The study aims to show how structure and process of international b2b sales process can be improved. Improving structure and process of international b2b sales process could enable salespersons carry out effective international b2b sales. The study reflects on (Moncrief & Marshall, 2005) which establishes the seven steps of sales for effective international b2b sales process.

1.3 Research Objective and Questions

The study objective focuses on cultural diversity and intercultural communication competence from the seller’s view of international b2b sales process. Prospective firms can understand the complexities that sellers encounter during buyer-seller interactions, differences in cultural orientations during international b2b sales process by salespersons country of focus and how it affects seller’s intercultural communication competence. This study should proffer knowledge for seller’s skills and competence, for better intercultural communication competence and as a result help research scholar’s gain understanding from this study. The theories and case firm were selected to address the study focus and experienced of salesperson during b2b international sales process with the following research questions.

Low cultural diversity between salespersons and buyers in the case company X (Netherland vs Australia, Finland vs USA, China vs China)

RQ1: How does the salesperson conduct international b2b sales process when cultural diversity between seller and buyers is low?

RQ2: How does salesperson’s intercultural communication competence affect the international b2b sales process when cultural diversity between seller and buyer is low?
High cultural diversity between salespersons and buyers in the case company X (Estonia vs Russia, Netherlands vs Japan, Netherlands vs South Africa, Finland vs Brazil)

RQ3: How does the salesperson conduct international b2b sales process when cultural diversity between seller and buyer is high?

RQ4: How does salesperson’s intercultural communication competence affect the international b2b sales process when cultural diversity between seller and buyer is high?

1.4 Research Structure

The beginning of this thesis starts with the introduction chapter, followed by the discussion about the background and motives behind the study. The research gap and research problem proceed. The research problem guides this thesis with the research objectives and questions and helps in addressing both a theoretical and empirical focus.

Literature review chapter introduces first chapter 2, which focuses on the theories of cultural diversity, seller’s intercultural communication competence and international b2b sales process of the seven step of selling. Chapter 2 mainly reflects on culture, introduces seller’s communication competence, skills that are expected to be implemented by salesperson during international sales process, knowledge that are expected to be implemented by salesperson during international sales process. Chapter 2 reflects also on attitudes that implemented by salesperson during international sales process.

Chapter 3 explains the theoretical framework of international sales process. Chapter 4 discusses on the overall overview of the chosen methodology and explains how this study has investigated the research question in practice. Following the methodology section is the empirical results. After result presentation, there is the section for discussion, which compares the results of this research to results of previous research. The last section is the conclusions, where the conclusions are drawn. The chapter reflects the researcher’s suggestions to the case company.

Qualitative research focuses on in-depth understanding through careful analysis of words, actions and records, whereas quantitative research looks past the words, actions and records to their mathematical significance (Maykut and Morehouse, 1994). Several qualitative approaches are concerned with interpretation and understanding (Eriksson and Kovalainen, 2008). This is the main goal of this master’s thesis while the empirical part attempts to deliver new and all-inclusive information of dynamic and relatively challenging phenomenon. Empirical results and synthesis chapter consists of
one case firm that have qualified the requirements of international b2b sales process. The chapter aims at explaining steps taken to achieve international b2b sales process, from salespersons perspectives, which have made it possible for the case firm to survive and develop. In this chapter the in-depth case analysis, is presented and discussed. Therefore, chapters 5 and 6 focus on firm X and present firm backgrounds and characteristics, their challenges during international b2b sales process.

Chapter 5 includes case analysis part where the empirical findings compared between the salespersons data, both similarities and differences presented. This study contributes to both academic research and business life. For the international b2b research, this study provides requisite reinforcement for the existing salespersons view as well as new insights for the international b2b sales research in its entirety. The findings are advantageous for managers of today and tomorrow as well.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter reflects on the theoretical overview of salesperson role and its activities during international b2b sales process. In order to understand these roles and activities based on theories, salesperson role as key actors in the implementation of international b2b sales process is therefore studied. This main study focus is based on salespersons activities during international b2b sales process. The thesis would also describe salesperson activities during international b2b sales process.

2.1 CULTURAL DIVERSITY

(Hall, 1976) confirms that cultural diversity includes complex situational frames, which includes situational dialect, material appurtenances, situational personalities, and behavioral patterns that occur in several settings, for example greeting, working, eating, bargaining, fighting, governing, showing affection, going to school, cooking and serving meal, hanging out and the likes. (Lauring, 2009) stated that situational frames is reflected in the variety of identifications which includes behavioral patterns, linguistic skills and bodies of knowledge linked to growing up in different places that provide the potential for the individual diversity. (Bush and Ingram, 2001) stated that because culturally diverse encounter focuses on their dissimilarity, (Deardorff, 2011) confirms that a deep cultural knowledge requires a more holistic and contextual understanding of a culture, which includes the historical, political and social contexts. (Venaik and Brewer, 2015) confirms that cultural diversity are made by man as part of his environment and everything that is exempted from the natural world constitutes culture which is defined by values, attitudes, beliefs and perceptions. (Schultz et al, 1999) stated that a systematic review of behaviors provides useful information that helps to reduce conflict of interest that may arise during interaction with contrasting cultures.
(Deardorff, 2011) confirms that any assessment of culture-specific knowledge needs to go beyond the conventional surface-level knowledge of foods, greetings and customs and so on.

2.1.1 Culture

According to (Schein, 1985 p. 9) “culture is a pattern of basic assumptions, invented, discovered or developed by a given group of people as they learn to cope with its problems of external adaptation and internal integration that has worked well enough for them to be considered valid”. (Schein, 1985 p. 9) “further explained that it can be taught to new members of the group as the correct way to perceive, think and feel in relation to those problems”. (Clemens & Cook, 1999) also defines “cultures as transmitted to individuals through the processes of socialization and maintained through institutions in the form of explicit or implicit rules as models and templates for behavior and interpretation that constrain action, define opportunity, and facilitate patterns of interaction”.

(McCort & Malhotra, 1993 p. 97) defines “culture as the complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, and morals, custom and any other capabilities and habit acquired by man as a member of society”. (Clemens & cook, 1999) definition of culture explains the process of culture and its transmission through socialization and institutional maintenance in the form of direct and indirect rules as platform that guides the behavior and interpretation of all form of human actions. This definition becomes acceptable as it clearly explain culture in the context of this research.

*Figure 1 and 2, National cultures based on (Hall, 1976 p. 79)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Low context cultures</th>
<th>High context cultures</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Documentation is encouraged</td>
<td>Reliance on verbal communication</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotions is not encouraged</td>
<td>emotions are considered important</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poor decoding of unspoken message</td>
<td>more sensitive to nonverbal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poor decoding of body language</td>
<td>more sensitive to feeling of others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time is considered important</td>
<td>Less importance is given to time</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### HIGH CONTEXT CULTURES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Japan</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Arab countries</td>
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<tr>
<td>Greece</td>
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<tr>
<td>Spain</td>
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<tr>
<td>Italy</td>
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<tr>
<td>England</td>
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<td>France</td>
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<tr>
<td>North America</td>
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<tr>
<td>Scandinavian countries</td>
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<tr>
<td>German Speaking Countries</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

#### 2.1.2 High and Low context cultures (Hall and Hall 1990)

Space when taken into consideration in high or low context cultures maybe seen as either accommodating or not. (Hall, 1976) stated that in high context cultures, it is common to find close space comfortable, people in these cultures share the same space by standing near each other. However, (Hall, 1976) stated that in low context cultures, space is uncomfortable because people in these cultures do not stand close to each other.

Time in high and low context cultures can have different interpretations and understood differently. (Hall, 1976) confirms that high context cultures have little preference and allocation for time and everything, in the event of change, there is slow process of change. Time is very essential for communication. (Hall, 1976) confirms that during urgent communication from high context cultures, time is not an urgent focus. (Hall, 1976) indicated that in low context cultures time is an urgent focus for communication.

Task is more important to low context cultures than high context cultures. (Hall, 1976) confirms that low context cultures focuses on task during sales relationship, this is because they believe that task accomplishment is possible when due processes if followed. However, (Hall, 1976) stated that high
context cultures are more flexible with time and usually deviates from the task or goal. Verbal and nonverbal communication are expressions for communications. (Hall, 1976) confirms that low context cultures communicate by expressing themselves more in words (verbal) whiles on the other hand high context cultures express themselves more commonly with the use of gestures (nonverbal).

High and low, context cultures are used to different existing variations in national cultures. (Korac-Kakabadse et al 2001) stated that this is the theoretical model used to define cultural variability which deals with how information are processed, time orientation and the interaction approach in a particular culture.

Implicit and explicit information are characterized by high and low context cultures. (Korac-Kakabadse et al, 2001) confirms that in a culture where explicitly vested information are in words and have unambiguous meaning, is regarded as (low-context) and in a culture where information is implicitly vested in shared experience and assumptions and transmitted through verbal and non-verbal codes is regarded as high context culture.

Translating information to meaning is a key aspect of high and low context cultures. (Hall, 1976) stated that in order to translate information into meaning in low context cultures a large amount of unambiguous explicit information is required to provide context. (Hall, 1976) stated that on the other end of the continuum, low level of programmed information within high context cultures are used to provide context; implicit information are present to specify meaning and it takes more time to translate information into meaning in high context cultures. (Hall, 1976) confirms that in high context cultures information exchange require more time to translate and abstract meaning into context.

2.1.3 Communication within low-context culture.

Communication within low-context cultures describes how the listener responds to a speaker. (Hall, 1976) explained that communication within low-context cultures requires that the listener with limited information practically told everything with much detail during information exchange. (Hall, 1976) stated that tone of voice is taken into consideration during communication and how information is transmitted to translate into meaning. (Korac-Kakabadse et al, 2001) confirms that tone is an important aspect of communication within low-context cultures.

Low context cultures consider swiftness, efficiency and careful programing of information. (Hall, 1976) confirms that low context cultures communications is cost-effective, fast, effective and satisfying. However, there is considerable amount time devoted to programming to enable careful
communication (Korac-Kakabadse et al, 2001) maintained that in low-context cultures, sellers rarely spend much time building relationships, establishing trust and if the culture doesn’t match, the sellers simply break off the relationship.

Low context cultures can be very creative and innovative. (Hall, 1976) stated that creativity and innovation are features of low context cultures when dealing with things that are new, but are comfortable with current changes than maintaining old systems. Detailed creative and innovative explanation and facts are part of low context cultures during information exchange. Low context cultures give many details to information exchange when dealing with high context cultures (Hall, 1976 p.127). Low context cultures have foresight capabilities. (Hall, 1976) stated that foresight capabilities enables low context cultures communicate solutions that confront unforeseen circumstances.

In conclusion, Hall was a major contributor to the knowledge on low context cultures. Low context cultures have its distinct behaviors for international b2b sales process, it is important that salespersons have an understanding of these characteristics in order to enable him interact and conduct b2b sales effectively with these cultures. The above characteristics of low context cultures presents an understanding of how low context cultures communicate. This could be a challenge for seller from high context cultures. It is important that with this knowledge of low context cultures these expectations do not become strange experiences for the high context cultures.

2.1.4 Communication within high context culture.

Expression of essential information from high context cultures could be a challenge for low context cultures. According to (Hall, 1976) expression of intrinsic information is hardly expressed freely from the mind of high context cultures and this makes it difficult for the low context cultures to interpret meaning.

Interpreting messages in high context cultures requires extra skills from the listener. (Korac-Kakabadse et al, 2001) stated that when trying to understand what is in the mind of the high-context cultures, they will expect others to pick up what is bothering them and do not feel the need to be specific. (Korac-Kakabadse et al, 2001) stated that they talk around the point but all indicators are placed for crucial points to be understood by the listener, it is the burden of the listener in the conversation to place meanings properly.
Tone and communication approach used within high context culture varies in order to interpret meaning. (Korac-Kakabadse et al, 2001) explained that the tone variation can be characterized as being too loud in a conversation and coupled with the use gestures to express themselves during conversation. Communication within high context cultures requires more time to establish relationship due to trust issues, friendship, family, and personal interest that are considered by high context cultures.

High context cultures are slow to change. (Hall, 1976) explained that communication within high context cultures are in the form of art, which unifies with often-interrelated force and are slow to change.

When confronted with new system high context cultures have trouble being creative. (Hall, 1976) stated that high context people could be creative within their own system but when moved to the bottom of the context scale, dealing with anything new becomes strange.

In conclusion, the above reflects the characteristics of high context cultures. This seemed frequently opposite to what is expected and experienced within low context cultures. This is because people from high from context cultures have their own unique behavior, which affects how they respond during international b2b sales process. Salesperson would need to be sensitive to these features when entering a high context culture for international b2b sales.

Background

(Hofstede, 2015) stated that the development of his model of culture was made possible with use of factor analysis to inspect the result gotten from a worldwide survey of IBM employee values from 1967 to 1973. (Hofstede, 2015) explained that the original dimensions were individualism-collectivism; uncertainty avoidance; power distance and masculinity-femininity. (Hofstede, 2015) later carried out independent research to realize the fifth dimension known as long-term orientation and in 2010-indulgence verses self-restraint was added. Criticism on Hofstede validity and limitations was extensively done (see McSweeney B, 2002). Contexting is a word created from Hall theory of high and low context cultures. (Hall, 1976) stated that contexting involves two entirely different but interrelated processes one inside the individual and the other outside.( Hall, 1976) stated that the first takes place from the brain and is a function of either experience, programmed or known as internalized contexting or the structure of the nervous system also known as innate contexting. No empirical evidence of Hall theory on contexting.
2.1.4.1 Individualism–collectivism

(Hofstede, 2015) stated that the preference for a loosely knit social context where individuals are required to take care of themselves only and their immediate families is regarded as individualism. The preference for a tightly knitted social structure where people take care of the members of a particular in-group in exchange for unquestioning loyalty is collectivism (Hofstede, 2015). Society based on individualism vs collectivism are characterized by their preference for the use of “I” or “we” in expression (Hofstede, 2015). (Gulbro and Herbig, 1999) stated that individualism expects the expression of personal freedom, in other words this implies being one’s self, having self-reliance or self-interest, self-directed or self-oriented. Collectivism explains the extent to which acceptance of responsibility to family, tribal groups, or nationalities, versus being other directed, competitiveness, co-operation among groups, having a concern for others in the same group (Gulbro and Herbig, 1999).

2.1.4.2 Uncertainty avoidance

In this, dimension individuals feel vulnerable by uncertainty and opacity and attempts to avoid these circumstances of uncertainty (Hofstede, 1991, p. 113). This dimension deals with the need for well-defined rules that guides a prescribed behavior. According to (Hofstede, 2015) uncertainty avoidance expression are how members of a particular society feel uncomfortable with uncertainty and opacity. (Hofstede, 2015) stated that this aspect deals with how a particular society deals with social order with the intention that the fact are not well known. (Hofstede, 2015) explained that weak UAI cultures sustains a slow decisiveness in which practice reckons more than standards. (Gulbro and Herbig, 1999) indicated that high uncertainty avoidance is characterized by the extent to which members of a particular society avoid risk by creating security through by-laws, rules, or religion; this is reflected by the extent to which how people feel threatened by ambiguous situations, thereby creating beliefs and institutions to avoid ambiguities.

2.1.4.3 Power distance

Power distance reflect an organizational hierarchy and families in a particular society. (Soares et al, 2007) stated that this relates to the consequences of power inequality and authority in a society, its influence on hierarchy and as it relates to family and organizational contexts. According to (Hofstede, 2015) people of less powerful culture accept and assume uneven circulation of power. Nevertheless, how a culture controls imbalances among its society is also relevant. (Hofstede, 2015) indicated that societies where people displays a huge level of power distance consent to a categorized order where everybody has a place and which requires no further rationalization. (Hofstede, 2015) further noted
that in this situation of cultures where small power distance occurs, individuals attempt to balance the circulation of power and demand rationalization for occurrence of dissimilarities of power. (Gulbro and Herbig, 1999) stated that the degree of centralization of authority and the degree of autocratic leadership have status consciousness or a hierarchy that is present and accepted within a society.

2.1.4.4 Masculinity–femininity

(Soares et al, 2007) indicated that this refers to dominant values in masculine countries that focus on achievement and success. In feminine countries, its dominant values focus on caring for others and the quality of life. (Hofstede, 2015) stated that it is an inclination in a society where the focus is based competition, personal accomplishment, gallantry, confidence and physical rewards. Femininity refers to a society that is focused on collaboration, humility, and being considerate for values and privileges of life. (Gulbro and Herbig, 1999) differentiate masculinity and femininity as competitive values versus nurturing, which also means the amount of helping and caring within a society rather than the extent to which a society differentiates roles between the sexes by placing emphasis on masculine values of performance and achievement.

2.1.4.5 Long-term orientation

Long-term orientation refers to a society that focus on virtues of future returns, whiles observing specific persistence and prudence (Hofstede, 2001, p. 359). The need for long-term orientation focus on the future. (Hofstede, 2015) confirm that these societies maintain some level of connection with its own history whiles confronting its current challenges and that of the future.

In conclusions, the above reflects on the contributions of Hofstede to the dimensions of cultures. Hofstede gave his dimensions of cultures from four different perspectives, which are Long-term orientation, masculinity–femininity, Uncertainty avoidance and Individualism–collectivism. Hofstede contribution gives a typical example of how different societies are characterized by culture; this is because each national culture and situation are different and are characterized by how a system functions. High and low, context cultures reflects the study focus from salespersons perspectives.

2.2 SELLERS INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION COMPETENCE

(Bush and Ingram 2001) indicated that when different national cultures come together to interact, their shared values, pattern of thinking and actions during the interactions are usually divergent. (Bush & Ingram 2001) explained that this situation comes with the initial challenge of common grounds of understanding, which results to increased degree of uncertainty and therefore limits the efficiency of
communication. Intercultural communication has been defined as interaction between people from two or more national cultures and most researchers limits this to face-to-face communication (Gudykunst, 2002, p. 179). Other researchers gave different interpretations. (Collier, 1989) stated that intercultural communication reflects on salesperson sense of ethnography of communication, attitudes and communication skills about other cultures. (Flores et al, 2015) stated that they includes skills, and expertise that conforms to standard for performing appropriate international b2b sales practice. (Ruben, 1976) explained that intercultural communication skills is applicable during intercultural context.

(Geertz 1973; Katriel and Philipsen, 1981) stated that the understanding of intercultural communication deals with the ethnography of communication, which includes interpretations, transmission and translations of other cultural context through language and symbols. (Wiseman et al, 1989) added that the existence of diverse attitudes during interaction refers to cross-cultural perceived behaviors from other cultural context. (Schultz et al, 1999) confirms that the stranger status of someone else national culture require his/her ability to adapt to the cultural demands. (Gudykunst 1995) stated that adaptation start with the persons self-perception of that culture and the motivation to interact with the new cultural and reaction from the new culture. (Kim, 1991, p. 268) defines adapting to new culture as “the capacity of a person’s internal psychic system to alter his/her own existing attributes and structures in order to accommodate the cultural demands of his new environment”. (Kim, 1986) explained that having heterogeneous knowledge of intercultural communication reflects a person’s competence to communicate in diverse cultural context. (Schultz, et al 1999) suggested that in order practice intercultural communication, there is a need to consider protocols of national culture, which may include the required team of participants during discussions, relevant information which are shared and when or how much information’s are expected to be shared. (Schultz et al, 1999) stated that knowledge about norms, customs, social, economic and political systems helps reduce uncertainty and enhances intercultural communication competence.

“Intercultural communication competence (IC) can be described as the ability to think, discriminate the differences, manage the experiences suitably and establish an effective communication in the most proper ways with individuals from different cultures in the multicultural atmosphere” by (Friedman and Berthoin, 2005). (Kupka, 2008, p.16) stated that intercultural communication within cultures is termed as an impression that indicates how members of different cultural group become aware of their cultural identity, cultural differences, interact effectively and appropriately with each other in diverse contexts by agreeing on the meaning of diverse symbol systems with the result of mutually satisfying relationships. (Chaisrakeo and Speece, 2004) stated that salespersons with high
intercultural competence are better at predicting the effect of their own behavior on others and are more likely to modify their behavior when they learn something about others.

Sellers require good intercultural communication competence for successful buyer-seller interaction. (Arasaratnam and Banerjee, 2011) stated that sellers experiences, listening skills, positive attitudes, results in the motivation to interact with people from other cultures and his/her ability to show empathy are variables required for intercultural communication competence. Each variable that is implemented systematically in a new cultural setting has an impact. (Arasaratnam and Banerjee 2011; Arasaratnam, 2006) stated that positive attitude toward people of other cultures leads to motivation and communicating within such cultures which then result to salesperson improved experience on intercultural communication competence.

Empathy expressed by a seller during buyer-seller interaction enables buyer’s concerns heard by the seller. (Arasaratnam and Banerjee 2011; Arasaratnam, 2006) stated that empathy exhibited by a seller during buyer-seller interaction is a result of the seller listening skills which in turn contributes to being perceived as a competent intercultural communicator.

In conclusion, salesperson require skills, attitude, motivation and knowledge associated with intercultural communication to conduct international b2b sales process. This is because a combination of these characteristics makes up what can enable the salesperson to communicate effectively in a new culture. Salesperson should strive to understand key skills, attitude, motivation and gain knowledge that would enable him/her communicate competently in an intercultural situation.

2.2.1 Skills

Sellers requires good interpersonal skills, which encompasses the attributes of attentiveness, perceptiveness and responsiveness to comprehend buyers within new cultures. (De Ruyter and Wetzels, 2000) indicated that these three dimensions of interaction involvement is the extent to which a seller is fully engaged both cognitively and behaviorally in a conversation. Hence, the seller behavior is demonstrated through verbal and nonverbal cues during the interaction. Salomonson et al (2012) confirms that nonverbal cues reflect the interest and commitment displayed in the buyer-seller interaction that is an affective display of commitment and involvement in the interaction while verbal cues are related the cognitive context of the interaction. Sellers can obtain as much information that is required during the process of being attentive. (Ford, 1999) confirms that attentiveness demonstrates a desire to obtain as much information that is required to provide solution for the customer and does not reflect a deviance in the tune out parts of the conversation.
Interpersonal communications is a skillful attribute that enables the salesperson to interact cooperatively with a buyer. (Waldeck et al., 2012) stated that interpersonal communication skill enables the salesperson to initiate, maintain and engage or disengage from interaction through acts of civility, conflict management, small talk, conversation management and rapport building.

Skills are necessary for communication because of diversity within cultures and it elements. (Spitzberg and Changnon, 2009) stated that people coming from diverse cultures, experiences, histories, races, and languages is faced with the challenge of understanding each other.

Salesperson requires skills to determine the outcome of international b2b sales process interaction. (Spitzberg and Changnon, 2009) confirms that several relevant skills are required in order to determine the outcome of an interaction, these includes the following interaction skills: understanding, meeting perspectives, precision, honesty, and clearness.

Salespersons skillful ability to use bicultural or intercultural as a speaker has its advantages in international b2b sales process. (Byram, 1997; 2003; 2001) Stated that salesperson can be skillfully represented as a bicultural or intercultural speaker for international b2b sale process (Byram, 1997; 2003; 2001) explained that bicultural speakers are limited to the knowledge of two cultures. (Byram, 1997; 2003; 2001) explained that whiles intercultural speaker is associated with one more than two cultures and possess a knowledge of his/her own language and varieties of other own culture and cultures of other different social groups in his/her own society or social group they find themselves. However, the identity of the salesperson can be confused in disguise whiles acting as mediators that facilitate interaction in both or several cultures (Byram, 1997; 2003; 2001).

In conclusions salespersons different unique skills of other cultural understanding, enables them to conduct international b2b sales process in a way that facilitates interaction and effective sales process. Different results are achieved from different salespersons with the above-mentioned skills because of the level competence and implementation approach by salespersons, which varies. The result will depend on profits from sales or sales call. Skill creates confidence and can keep the salesperson persistent. The above reflects on the need for skills by a salesperson

2.2.2 Knowledge

Sellers with substantial knowledge of new cultures are required for international b2b sales process. (Spitzberg and Changnon, 2009) stated that knowledge of one’s cultural norms and being able to recognize any cultural differences with an open mind to new experiences and diversity and without
being judgmental provides a foundation for entering a more globalized world. Salesperson with historical knowledge of a country, when applied for international b2b sales process results to effective sales process. Several experiences and expectation awaits a salesperson entering new business environment. (Schultz et al 1999) stated that sometimes establishing international b2b sales relationship by a salesperson starts with entering a foreign culture with full or limited knowledge which gives the seller often new experiences about the buyer national culture in terms of customer’s behavior, beliefs, activities, customs and organizational nuances.

(Spitzberg and Changnon, 2009) confirmed that an understanding of history of a national country will enable a person prepare for (a) identifying and understanding cultural differences and (b) participating effectively in and across the national culture through (c) mutual collaborative means with buyer and (d) evaluation of his or her own performance in these contexts. Salesperson sensitivity to cultural diversity is required to understand foreign cultures. Schultz et al (1999) confirms that when there is a lack of sufficient sensitivity by a salesperson to understand cultural nuances, this could often result to a breach of cultural etiquette and as a result, may seriously jeopardize the sales relationship. Schultz et al (1999) stated that under the premises of cultural nuances salesperson gain understanding of new cultures by initiating and sustaining buyer–seller interactions in a competent manner.

In conclusions, knowledge of new cultures by a salesperson is very important for conducting international b2b sales process. This knowledge gives confidence when the salesperson has been able to read about the history and culture of other people. It enables the salesperson understand what to expect and prepares him/herself on proper conduct and response to buyers needs in an effective manner.

2.2.3 Attitude and motivation

Theory about consistency relate to the sustainability of salesperson attitude and motivation during the moments of international b2b sales challenge. (Elo et al, 2015) confirmed that consistency theory view influences buyer- seller interaction.

(Elo et al, 2015) stated that if the motivational structures and attitudes of a salesperson and his perceptions of a buyer in his environment are in conflict, the seller should possess and turn to his inbuilt scheme of motivation and attitude to remain consistent and avoid disharmony. (Elo et al, 2015) confirm that consistency is a result of seller implementation of his in built scheme of motivation encompassed by positive feelings, inherent needs, and interpretations of buyers, which is dynamic in
nature. Certain inherent needs of a seller motives and sustains his/her attitudes (Elo et al, 2015) explained that consistency theory describes four basic needs that sustains motivation or attitudes: the need for: orientation/control, attachment/bond, self-esteem increase/protection, gain pleasure or avoid displeasure. (Spitzberg and Changnon, 2009) confirmed that cultural self-awareness and deep cultural knowledge, sociolinguistic awareness of how to listen, observe, evaluate, analyze, interpret, relate other cultural norm are components that keeps the salesperson motivated with positive attitude.

In conclusions, salespersons with diverse attitude and motivations often learn through practice in order to conduct international b2b sales process. The right attitude and motivation empowers the salesperson to remain persistent in buyer-seller interaction despite any challenges that may arise.

2.3 INTERNATIONAL B2B SALES PROCESS (seven steps of selling)

International sales process requires a systematic approach by sellers in order to accomplish successful international b2b sales process. In order for sellers to conduct international b2b sales process successfully it has to consider creating and implanting the right process that enables the activities of sales to stay competitive when compared to firm’s competitors. (Moncrief and Marshall, 2005) confirmed that b2b sales involves the exchange goods and services through the activities of buying and selling between two companies. This implies that a company purchases products or services sold by another company in exchange for profit and solutions.

2.3.1 Seven steps of selling

(Dubinsky, 1980; 1981) stated that the seven steps of selling is one of the most widely and oldest accepted paradigms in the sales discipline in modern selling history. (Moncrief and Marshall, 2005) stated that the seven steps of selling is one of the most widely accepted beliefs in the field of sales, this can be found in the early sales books and periodicals. (Moncrief and Marshall, 2005) explained that the 1920 sales training book titled how to increase your sales lists is known as the six steps of selling: (1) find the prospect, (2) preapproach, (3) approach, (4) the demonstration, (5) the argument, and (6) the close (How to Increase Your Sales 17th ed.). (Moncrief and Marshall, 2005) indicated that the follow-up was the only traditional selling step not mentioned, which is more recent and for at least 80 years, the steps in a selling process have remained virtually the same.

Salespersons need to understand how to manage international b2b sales process around the complexities of cultural diversity and seller intercultural communication competence that may pose
a challenge and limit firm competitiveness. (Churchill et al, 1997) stated that sales process is best described as selling activities delivered by the sellers or carried out by sales people. (Moncrief and Marshall, 2005) confirmed that sales process is a series of interrelated steps, which are referred to as the seven steps of selling composed of prospecting, pre-approach, approach, presentation, objection handling, the close, and follow up. The seven step to selling is necessary for this research because it entails steps to selling process. During international b2b sales process, the salesperson applies the selling steps to achieve sales result.

2.3.2 Prospecting

The first step of the sales process is regarded as prospecting (Moncrief and Marshall, 2005, p.15) defined prospecting as the technique salespeople apply to search for new customers or potential customers. Prospect is defined with a focus or goal (Jolson and Wotruba, 1992) explained that the focus behind prospecting is the need for sellers to expand its customer base. (Ngai et al, 2009) explained that it is used by salespersons to know in details who their own customers are. Prospects are also regarded as potential new customers and in theory they could also include companies focused on international b2b context different from salespersons current customer base whiles in practice it comprises of a limited list of companies that could be purchased from specialized vendors (Buttle, 2009; Rygielski et al, 2002; Wilson, 2006).

The vast amounts of information in those lists tends to often overwhelm international b2b salespersons, (Wilson, 2003) suggested that salesperson should carry out a selections process where a set of random rules used to determine prospects and the outcome of this selection should be the list of prospects. (D’Haen and Van Den Poel, 2013) stated that the seller regards prospects as salesperson suspects who meet certain predefined characteristics. (Bose and Chen, 2009; Chou, 2000) suggested that prospects profiles should be created by that salesperson to match his/her current customer base and the chosen profiles are consequently used to predict future prospects. In order to determine how to match prospect profiles (D’Haen and Van Den Poel, 2013) explained that it is a method of grouping in which identical prospects are put together in the same cluster to form current customers. (Bose and Chen, 2009; Chou, 2000) explained that this group continues to expand with less similar prospects, which has a measure of (dis) similarity, assigned to these prospects. Prospects in the same cluster or circle share comparable preferences and behaviors (Bruckhaus, 2010). (D’Haen and Van Den Poel, 2013) confirmed that finding prospects that are similar to the current customer base increases the possibility that these prospects will become future customers of the firm when compared with less similar prospects because they belong to the same composition of the company.
2.3.3 Preapproach

(Moncrief and Marshall, 2005) stated that pre-approach is the second step of the sales process that requires salesperson to do their research on the prospect or customer by familiarizing themselves with the needs of customer. (Moncrief and Marshall, 2005) stated that it requires making a review of the previous correspondences, and pull together all new and relevant material that could be appropriate for bringing the sales call to itself. (Flores et al, 2015) suggested the use of axiomatic design (AD) begins with the salespersons recognition of a societal need. This is because societal needs are associated with what the customers are looking for in a product, process, system (henceforth-called ‘product’ or ‘artifact’) which helps to define the product that matches the customer domain.

Defining customers’ needs during the pre-approach stage can be unclear. (Flores et al, 2015) confirms that customer needs or attributes desired from a product can sometimes be difficult to define or vaguely defined. (Flores et al, 2015) defined customers need as the psychological features of the product that arouses the desire of the buyer to purchase the product. (Flores et al, 2015) explained that the ‘customer’ starts and performs the desired act of purchase by making the need design to arise from a set that contains what the customer needs from the product. (Flores et al, 2015) explained that seller whose goal is to satisfy the need of the customer, begins with analyzing the customer purchase and considering both the product and the customer while searching for the related customer needs.

2.3.4 Approach

The third step of the sales process is the approach. (Moncrief and Marshall, 2005) stated that it consists of strategies and tactics employed by salespeople when seeking customers and creating early relationship with the customer. (Moncrief and Marshall, 2005) stated that this approach includes opening small talk, handshake, eye contact, and generally making a good initial impression. (Valtakoski 2015) confirmed that during relationship initiation, the potential buyer and seller engage in early interaction and considers the possibility of an exchange by weighing the potential benefits, costs and obligations of the relationship and the phase ends when both partners have established an initial relationship, including settling on uncertain norms and expectations from the relationship.

2.3.5 Presentation

The fourth step of sales process is presentation by the salesperson. (Moncrief and Marshall, 2005) confirmed that this involves the presentation of the main body of sales by salespersons during a sales call and this should happen when the salesperson has scheduled to discuss the needs of the customer.
In order to create value propositions with the customer, presentation involves communicating the needs of the customer through the process of dialogue with the customer (Lusch and Vargo, 2006). (Grönroos 2000) stated that a dialog is an interactive process of reasoning between the salesperson and the customer with the goal of creating a common platform of knowledge for discussion and comprehension. Communication process between customers and salesperson involves the presentation of firm’s essential solutions for establishing satisfaction, which results in a mutually held view concerning expectations and performance of sales promise (Selnes 1998).

2.3.6 Overcoming Objection

The fifth step of sales process is overcoming objection. (Moncrief and Marshall 2005) stated that objections can generally be defined as a when customer enquiries and indecisions is reported about the company product or company. Overcoming customer’s objection is associated with solving customer complain about the company product or company. (Hirschman 1970) stated that objection by a customer has long been regarded in the marketing literature as when a customer is dissatisfied about a product and has the associated costs of submitting the complaint to the firm in order to receive a solution to the problem that is being experienced. Complain helps to initiate a change in the company practices, policies, or offerings of the firm (Hirschman 1970). Overcoming objectives helps the firm improve its company process or practice. Objection refers a situation when a customer chooses to communicate with the firm concerning a difficult consumption that he/she has experienced instead of retreating from being a customer (Folkes et al 1987; Maxham, 2001). Objection gives the firm an opportunity to offer some positive kind of solution and take some corrective action regarding their processes (Folkes et al 1987; Maxham, 2001).

2.3.7 Close

The sixth step of selling is the implementation of effective close during international b2b sales process. (Moncrief and Marshall 2005) established the fact that close is the successful completion of the sales presentation by a salesperson during b2b sales interaction, culminates with commitment from the customer to buy the good or service. (Hawes et al, 1996) stated that the assumed close is a situation where the salesperson just proceeds to write up customers order based on the prospect's earlier agreement during the moment of presentation. (Hawes et al, 1996) sated that a prospect's objection to this close would not be consistent with the prospect's previous agreements. (Hawes et al, 1996) explained that earlier agreement is established as assumed close when salesperson can re-emphasize these agreements and can execute the close by stating some selling phrase “You've agreed
that this is an excellent wood cutting solutions, let's write your order today and start reducing costs and improving service”.

(Hawes et al, 1996) stated that in a close condition, the salesperson could state selling phrase like "You've agreed that this is an excellent wood cutting solution, do you want me to ship your order to the central receiving division or directly to your department?" The benefit is that salesperson seeks a decision, so that the salesperson do not appear presumptuous because allowing a decision notwithstanding a decision will assumes the purchase by the customer.

2.3.8 Follow-up

The last step is the follow up stage where salespersons follow up on the services or product sold to customers. (Moncrief and Marshall, 2005) explained that it involves the salesperson making sure that customer is happy with the product or service he/she bought and that everything that was promised is delivered to the customer.

Technology aids the swiftness of salesperson follow-up with customers. (Moncrief and Marshall, 2005) stated that traditional follow-up requires phone call to the customer or letter sent to thank the customer for the purchase of the product and to determine if the product has met the buyer expectations. (Moncrief and Marshall, 2005) explained that the transformative factor here is the increase in effectiveness of communication with technology such as email, which has become a dominant method of follow-up because of its ease of use and swiftness. salesperson can go back to his/her office and use email to send a quick message that the customer can receive immediately rather than two or three days later. Phone is swift, but it is becoming difficult to get through to the customer due to some network interruption. Salesperson can also carry out visits to customer location to fulfill the follow up stage. (Moncrief and Marshall, 2005) explained that this process accompanies a visit from the salesperson to the customer locations of sales in order to determine if there was any problem with the product sold to the customer.

In conclusion, international b2b sales process requires a step-by-step approach was outline above as the chosen theory highlights how salesperson could carry out international b2b sales process. This systematic approach enables the salesperson understand how to conduct international b2b sales process in a systematic manner. This step by step approach as outlined above gives the salesperson an idea from how to start and possibly end with customers from different cultures.
3 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The analytical framework for the present thesis is on the literature discussed in the previous sections concerning cultural diversity and seller’s intercultural communications competence. The framework emphasizes on international b2b sales process as the overall objective of this research is to study how salesperson are able confront the characteristics and challenges of cultural diversity and intercultural communication competence during international b2b sales process. The framework summarizes the reviewed literature discussed in previous chapters and consists of three main parts: 1) cultural diversity 2) seller’s intercultural competence and 3) international b2b sales process.

Fig 1. Theoretical framework of study

The above concept represents the relationship that affects international b2b sales process.

4 METHODOLOGY

This next chapter will reflect on the chosen research methodology, as discussed thoroughly. The entire research procedure indicates explanations to prepare the reader to continue with an empirical part of this thesis. The following chapter presents the choice of the empirical research approach and the study method. Furthermore, it also includes discussion about the process of data source selection involved in the research and challenges experienced. After the empirical section, the limitations and
ethical issues that relates to this study coupled with a discussion about the validity and reliability of the findings was stated.

4.1 Research method

The aim of this study is to research how cultural diversity and intercultural communication competence affects international b2b sales process. Therefore, data collection was done qualitatively by interviewing salespeople of the case company. Case study literatures is the research design of this study, based on (Yin 2003; 2009). According to (Yin, 2003) a research design is “the logical sequence that connects empirical data to a study’s initial research questions and, ultimately, to its conclusions”. It acts as a “blueprint” of research, dealing with at least four problems: what questions to study, what data are relevant, what data to collect, and how to analyze the results (Yin, 2003, p.21). This type of case study is usually done when one economic actor is researched (Eriksson and Kovalainen, 2008). In this research, the economic actor on focus is one company and its salespersons. Case study research offers researchers an opportunity to have a real-life perspective (Eriksson and Kovalainen, 2008). Cultural diversity and intercultural communication competence happens in real-life rather than in clinical set ups. According to (Patton, 2002) qualitative research endeavors to understand unique interactions in particular phenomenon. He continued by saying that qualitative approach is suitable for phenomenon of dynamic and complex circumstances that induce human activity. Whiles (Yin, 2009) stated that using single case is an applicable research approach for creating theories and certainly this study strives to create new perceptions on the international b2b sales process theory of the chosen Finnish firm.

This case study is a single-case study, as there is only one case company. According to (Yin, 2012) case studies can be divided into single- and multiple-case studies. In multiple-case studies there are two or more cases studied at the same research (Yin, 2012). In single-case study, the researcher collect data about informant group (Yin, 2012). In this study, the data was collected from salespersons.

The case studies is usually practical and normative (Eriksson and Kovalainen, 2008). Although there have been a lot of critic about case studies managerial perspective (Eriksson and Kovalainen, 2008) this study aims to offer information for sales managers also. The aim is to help sales managers to develop practical solutions for cultural diversity and intercultural communication competence for its salesperson.

(Eriksson and Kovalainen, 2008) divided case studied into two categories: intensive case study research and extensive case study research. In intensive case study research, the aim is to understand
unique case deeply and provide thick, holistic and contextualized description (Eriksson and Kovalainen, 2008). In extensive case study research, the aim is to test or generate generalizable theoretical constructs (Eriksson and Kovalainen, 2008). In extensive case study, research different cases are compared (Eriksson and Kovalainen, 2008). The perspective of this study is more intensive than extensive. The aim is to study one particular case company.

This master’s thesis focuses on one single case firms for in-depth study. This study has a case firm with different conditions and only connective factors are Finland and the international b2b sales process phenomenon with other countries. This research strives to provide an in-depth understanding of the international b2b sales process of the Finnish firm with other countries. The purpose of this thesis is to find answers to the research problem: How cultural diversity and seller’s intercultural communication competence affects international sales process. Because of this research problem, it has created research questions that should guide the literature review and help in choosing the appropriate research methodology for the thesis.

The research questions are:

Low cultural diversity between salespersons and buyers in the case company X (Netherland vs Australia, Finland vs USA, China vs China)

RQ1: How does the salesperson conduct international B2B sales process when cultural diversity between seller and buyers is low?

RQ2: How does salesperson’s intercultural communication competence affect the international B2B sales process when cultural diversity between seller and buyer is low?

High cultural diversity between salespersons and buyers in the case company X (Estonia vs Russia, Netherlands vs Japan, Netherlands vs South Africa, Finland vs Brazil)

RQ3: How does the salesperson conduct international B2B sales process when cultural diversity between seller and buyer is high?

RQ4: How does salesperson’s intercultural communication competence affect the international B2B sales process when cultural diversity between seller and buyer is high?

The overview and theme of the study: the topic; research problem and the research questions have influenced the choice of my research methodology. Since the commencement of International
business studies, there has been several number of published qualitative method research that has lesser qualitative research, there are two arguments behind this low status of qualitative studies in international business research.

Hence, the percentage of qualitative research is already being prominent. There can be three arguments behind the significance of qualitative methodology in the field of international business research. According to (Wright 1996; Osland and Osland, 2001 in Marchan-Piekkari and Welch, 2004) stated that the lacks of adequate theory development in the international business research, instead of empirical testing the international business research requires more exploratory and theory-generating research.

Qualitative research provides a deeper cross-cultural comprehension, which makes the researcher become more aware of significant factors such as cultural bias or ethnocentric assumptions and thus the factors become less implausible. Qualitative research argument seeks the meaning and beliefs that underlie the chosen topic, it provides answers to problems that underlie the action and are usually more complex (i.e. “why” and “how”) and questions to traditional (“what”) explanatory questions (Marchan-Piekkari and Welch, 2004).

4.2 Data gathering and analysis process

There are two motives associated to the standard of this search and selection, this first standard was for a study focus based on firm conducting international b2b sales processes and engaged in rapid international b2b sales process.

Hence, selecting a case firm from the same country and region would increase the reliability of the study. The second motive behind the selection of the case firm is associated with practical conditions: lisalimi region minimize the costs of research when compared to firms outside the country. This means, student budget was taken into account in order to save resources (money and time) the interviews were planned to be held in vierema but was organized with the use of business skype, which was facilitated by firm’s support.

The Founder’s vision had an important role in the selection factor of the firm. (Oviatt and McDougall’s, 1994) definition of founders’ vision: “business organization that, from inception, seeks to derive significant competitive advantage from the sales of outputs in multiple countries” has been accepted widely as firm focused on international b2b sales process associated with vision of founders, since the founders vision, was adopted into this master’s thesis as well.
The search for case extended to vierema where the researcher had visited and found the chosen firm. The homepage of Kuopio innovation (Kuopioinnovation.fi) originally enable search for potential technology firms in Kuopio in addition to a local science park homepage (Technopolis.fi) to search the location of potential firms in Kuopio regions. During the search process in vierema, firms that seemed to have potentials to meet the requirements of this master’s thesis extended to the next stage of the search. The case company of this research is Firm X. Firm X is a Finnish company based in Vierema that was established since 1970. Firm X manufactures several range of forestry machines and vehicles for its international b2b sales.

The case company employs sales directors to manage its international b2b sales activities. Presently, the firm carries out international b2b sales activities in Asia, Asia pacific, Africa, Europe, Eastern Europe, North America and South America. In each of the focused country, there are one or two sales director to manage and monitor the sales. In each country, sales directors work with its dealers and distributors to achieve sales. Sales directors also work with some salespeople from the firm independent sales representatives. The salespeople are trained professionals who work with the sales directors to offer sales and solutions to customers.

Firm X values about international b2b sales process are focused on honesty. This means that they work with high level of ethic, professionalism and openness and then perceived by customers as being reliable firms to work with. Firm X value for work cooperation entails good team spirit. Firm X values its customers. They show genuine interest in helping them accomplish their sales goal. Firm X products are also innovative and high-tech for woodcutting. Considerable amount of research and development done on their service and product create an opportunity for change in its service offers.

There are two strategies of analysis (Eriksson and Kovalainen, 2008). The first strategy is based on pre-formulated theoretical propositions and a respective coding system (Eriksson and Kovalainen, 2008). The later one is based on development of a case description and direct interpretation of research materials rather than formal coding procedure (Eriksson and Kovalainen, 2008). The strategy of this research is following the second strategy of Eriksson and Kovalainen (2008) more than the first, as the research has practical concern rather than testing pre-given theoretical framework.

Also, the study from (Tuomi and Sarajärvi (2009) propose that there are 3 strategies of analysis: data-driven, theory-oriented and theory-bound strategy. In data-driven analysis the aim is to form theory from the data collected (Tuomi and Sarajärvi, 2009). In theory-bound analysis there are captives to theory or the theory can be helpful in the progression of analysis (Tuomi and Sarajärvi, 2009). The
theory-oriented analysis is traditional analyzing method in natural sciences (Tuomi and Sarajärvi, 2009). The analysis is based on some theory, model or thinking of authority (Tuomi and Sarajärvi, 2009). In this research, the analyzing strategy is based on the data, but also the theory has impact on analysis. The analyzing strategy is theory-bound.

The form of analyzing can be divided into inductive and deductive analysis (Tuomi and Sarajärvi, 2009). In inductive analysis the order is from single opinion to general opinion and in deductive analysis the order is reversed (Tuomi and Sarajärvi, 2009). (Tuomi and Sarajärvi, 2009) propose that there are also third form of analysis: abductive analysis. In abductive analysis the theory formation is possible, when there is some thread in observation making (Tuomi and Sarajärvi, 2009). The form of analysis is more inductive than deductive in this study.

The process of analysis followed the process of data-driven analysis. In data-driven analysis the process has three phases: simplifying the data, categorizing the data and forming theoretical concepts (Tuomi and Sarajärvi, 2009). In the first phase the data is simplified: all the irrelevant is removed from the data (Tuomi and Sarajärvi, 2009). In the second phase the coded terms are carefully explored and similarities and differences are found and categorized into several categories according to their characteristics, features or perceptions (Tuomi and Sarajärvi, 2009). In the final phase the relevant information is separated and theoretical concepts are formed according to that information (Tuomi and Sarajärvi, 2009).

According to (Eriksson and Kovalainen, 2008) the data can be coded for example by labels or names for the codes or definitions of what the code concerns (thematically). At the beginning of analysis the data was coded thematically. Thematic coding helped to categorize the data.

The analyzing method used in this research is content analysis. The content analysis is an analyzing method that can be used in all qualitative researches (Tuomi and Sarajärvi, 2009). According to (Tuomi and Sarajärvi 2009) the content analysis enables systematic and objective analysis to almost any written data. Therefore the data of this research was transcribed before analysis. The aim of content analysis is to gain general and compressed view of the studied phenomenon (Tuomi and Sarajärvi, 2009). The method has received criticism, because in some cases the researcher has not done any analysis thus he or she presents the organized data as the results of the study (Tuomi and Sarajärvi, 2009).
The next stage required the collection of all the information from the potential case firm by using Internet, annual reports and different media sources.

The fact that there were earlier connections to these potential interviewees and the firm decreased the pressures and made the situation moderately relaxed. The first email and phone call succeeded even though the firm CEO was not able to take part in the study. Although, the CEO recommended to call to the firm X’s sales director and which showed positive influence on the process. The next director
recommended another person and that showed further positive effect that helped the process. The last phone call was a lot easier when consideration to start with the phrase “Mr. X recommended calling directly to you Mr. Y” and then introduced who you are and what you are doing and then followed as the agreed process.

The following week was the first interview and therefore lots of time allowed for the planning process of the actual interviews dates. In a research, plan for this master’s thesis gave the possibility to arrange an open or theme interview as a main interview method. Nevertheless, after considering personal capabilities and the level of experience as an interviewer the semi-structured interview method followed.

The general interview guide (See appendix1and 2) was planned to support the interview process. Conversely, all questions were asked, recorded and the focus was on themes that related to cultural diversity, intercultural communication process, international sales process and associated challenges. Each interview session, planned separately and started the firms appointed salespersons.

Familiar topic in the beginning facilitated the concurrent conversation. The main purpose was to condition the state of mind of the interviewee where s/he could talk as naturally as possible.

The interview session lasted for about (30mins) thirty minutes (1hr) one hour, all of the interviews sessions was recorded, and permission for the recording process always inquired before each interview session. The lettering process was relatively strenuous. When the lettering was completed, the analysis process was ready to begin; an in-depth data consideration studied several times by the researcher to acquire an overall understanding of the firm, as it exists in the thesis. After being aware of the firm’s business concept and environment, there was, need to acquire a holistic case description of the firm in writing.

Common theme search followed the next stage of the analysis thoroughly. Therefore, the interviews were read thoroughly numerous times and common or divergent words, lines, chapters and larger sections of text (codes) that related to the research problem, research questions and theoretical framework were stored for later analysis. The use of codes under each main categories of the study proceeded. Lastly, results of the empirical analysis reflected under the result analysis chapter.

Table 1: The codes for salesperson’s data
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Citation from the data</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Steps of international sales process when seller and customer is high or low</td>
<td>Prospecting</td>
<td>“I have a database which contains a list of prospective customers in different area and this data base are collected from different sources which is used as a base” (salesperson D)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Preapproach</td>
<td>“In china, first we read newspapers, read the website and magazine to find out about what customers need and where they are” (salesperson A)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Approach</td>
<td>We know they will need our machines but the main challenge is how to contact the main decision makers or key person for sales” (salesperson A)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Presentation</td>
<td>“A lot of demonstration is involved where the product is shown live with the help of a trained professional that will explain about firm X product” (salesperson D)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Close</td>
<td>“The clients will request, purchase more or they can recommend firm X to other customers once good relationship is established with the customers”” (Salesperson A).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How salesperson conduct international B2B sales process when cultural diversity between seller and buyer is high or low</td>
<td>Cultural association</td>
<td>“Good communication will guarantee trust because all business is based on trust, good communication helps to builds trust and without good communication, there is no guarantee for good business” (Salesperson A).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Follow-up</td>
<td>“The whole steps includes the follow up stage which is not just me alone but includes firm X trainer who trains the customer about the product and the customer is also introduced to those in firm X for any further help” (salesperson D).</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hierarchy/Power distance</th>
<th>“Brazilian culture is very religious, hierarchical and communications are very informal when compared to Finland. Everything is focused on the director for decision making and in terms of communication only the director talks to director or manager talks to manager” (salesperson E)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cultural interaction</td>
<td>“when we make business, if they are Chinese, for me, i know what they are thinking, what their habits are, Chinese customers are indirect but still very friendly” (salesperson A)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultural knowledge</td>
<td>“cultural issues arise with new customers, which requires an explanation about my background, but with the old</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Salesperson intercultural communication competence affects the sales process when cultural diversity between seller and customer is high or low</td>
<td>Communication style</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language</td>
<td>“First, is good level of English off course its best if you can understand the Chinese language but most of the people speak English” (salesperson A)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication skills</td>
<td>“Communications with them enables our firm to know who is who and in what business language to communicate with these customers” (salesperson B)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trust</td>
<td>“Good communication will guarantee trust because all business is based on trust, good communication helps to builds trust and without good communication, there is no guarantee for good business” (Salesperson A)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Background and history</td>
<td>“It is better to read about customer’s history of their culture, political situation and social habits” (Salesperson A)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
5 RESULTS

5.1 The respondents and country of sales

The respondents of the study are salespeople of the chosen case firm X. The researcher interviewed five salespeople from the case company. The number of respondents were limited to five due to tight schedule of salesperson in different countries. All of the salesperson’s respondents were male. Their age varied from 35 to 50 years old. Although, most of the respondents have worked in other companies before working in the case company, their work experiences differed a lot as some of them have been in sales and some were new in selling field. The longest experience in selling was thirteen years and the shortest was five years.

Table 2: Demographics of the salespersons

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Salespersons</th>
<th>Salesperson A</th>
<th>Salesperson B</th>
<th>Salesperson C</th>
<th>Salesperson D</th>
<th>Salesperson E</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Country of origin</td>
<td>China</td>
<td>Estonia</td>
<td>Netherlands</td>
<td>Finland</td>
<td>Finland</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Job title</td>
<td>Sales representative</td>
<td>Sales director</td>
<td>Sales director</td>
<td>Sales director</td>
<td>Sales director</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sales Experience</td>
<td>71/2 years</td>
<td>5 years</td>
<td>9 years</td>
<td>11 years</td>
<td>13 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Industry</td>
<td>Forest machine</td>
<td>Forest machine</td>
<td>Forest machine</td>
<td>Forest machine</td>
<td>Forest machine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Customers country of origin</td>
<td>China</td>
<td>Russia</td>
<td>Japan, Australia, South Africa</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>Brazil</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------------------------</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3: International B2B sales process in similar cultural context

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Seller country of origin</th>
<th>Customer country of origin</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Netherland</td>
<td>Australia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finland</td>
<td>USA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>China</td>
<td>China</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

5.2 Steps of international b2b sales process

This section presents the results from several salespersons regarding the steps taken during international b2b sales process with customers from similar cultural context.

5.2.1 Prospecting

Only salesperson D showed that prospecting was required when implementing one of the steps of international b2b sales process when dealing with customers from similar cultural context. This means that they need to have data that contains a list of prospective customers in different area and these database are collected from different sources which is then used as a base for seeking out prospective customer of similar cultural context.

"I have a database which contains a list of prospective customers in different area and this data base are collected from different sources which is used as a base" (salesperson D)

5.2.2 Preapproach

Salesperson A confirmed that preapproach with customers of similar cultural context requires that there is need to read the newspapers, websites and magazines in order to find out what the customers’ needs before embarking on international b2b sales process. Salesperson A further stated that there is
need to know more about the different cultures of the customers and their habits and better understand them before embarking into international b2b sales process with customers of similar cultural context.

“In china, first we read newspapers, read the website and magazine to find out about what customers need and where they are” (salesperson A)

“We need to know more about the different cultures of the customers and the habits of customers to better understand them” (salesperson A)

5.2.3 Approach

Salesperson A explained that in other to approach customers with similar cultural context during international b2b sales process, one major challenge would be to know how to contact the major decision maker or the key person for sales process.

We know they will need our machines but the main challenge is how to contact the main decision makers or key person for sales” (salesperson A)

Salesperson D explained that a chance talk with the customers means explaining about the product to customers.

Every time i had a chance to talk to a new customers, i will explains about the product to the customer in order to get new prospect added to the database (salesperson D)

5.2.4 Presentation

Salesperson D and A have shown that they embarked on international b2b sales process by making presentation with customers that have similar cultural context and therefore, applied a lots of demonstration, make email contact and make advertisement through print media and internet display of their products to customers with similar cultural context. In addition, Salesperson D indicated that they take advantage of the several advertising tools as a platform to present the firm product.

“A lot of demonstration is involved where the product is shown live with the help of a trained professional that will explain about firm X product” (salesperson D)

“Through emails contacts, call or visit them directly” (salesperson A).

“We also advertise a lot through magazines, internet, different events and shows where new prospects are met” (salesperson D).
5.2.5 Close

Salesperson A explained that during the close stage, clients with similar cultural context will request to purchase more or they could recommend firm X to other customer’s once good relationship were established with the customers. At this step of international b2b sales process, Salesperson D explained that implementing the close step with customers that have similar cultural context would confirms that decisive moment when customers would say if they are interested or not.

*The clients will request, purchase more or they can recommend firm X to other customers once good relationship is established with the customers (Salesperson A)*.

“If we have done the whole process the right way, there will be no short cut or tricks to close the deal because it requires a natural step by step process where the customer will indicate if he is interested”. (Salesperson D)

5.2.6 Follow up

Salesperson D and Salesperson C acknowledges the implementation of follow up stage with customers from similar cultural context during international b2b sales process with the application of training and issuance of support materials to their customers.

*“The whole steps includes the follow up stage which is not just me alone but includes firm X trainer who trains the customer about the product and the customer is also introduced to those in firm X for any further help” (salesperson D).*

*“We support our dealers with all the marketing and sales information’s that they need which includes the price list, sales sheets, sales folders and giving them access to all the material through dealers platform” (salesperson C)*

5.3 How cultural similarities affected the sales process

This section presents results from salespersons on how similar cultural context affected their international b2b sales process.
5.3.1 Cultural association

Salesperson D explained that on first meeting with customers there is usually a curiosity of cultural background from customers, which is required during the early stages of their interaction with the customers.

“different cultural issues arise with new customers, which requires an explanation about my background, but with the old customers there is virtually no issues about culture that requires any initial explanation about my background because they have already asked these issue in the beginning” (salesperson D)

Salesperson D further argued cultural association during sales process is the same, expect that certain factors limits the time it take yield the results of sales.

“sales process is the same but the time it takes to get through to the final goal takes longer which has to do with cultural differences, understanding the markets and their needs and building the relationship of trust and to convince the customer” (salesperson D)

5.3.1 Hierarchy/Power distance

Sales respondents and customers from Netherlands and Australia respectively, represent low power distance society; these cultures represents individuals where their society exhibit independent abilities and collaborative efforts from management.

“We get commitment from management to step into market place” (Salesperson C)

Sales respondents from china shows individuals from a country that has high power distance society. Employees from this culture do not exhibit their individual ability to access those in authority and individual’s rights is rarely respected whiles inequalities are seen as a growing order from this society on every level. Individuals from china who occupy managerial positions exhibits their role as formal authority figures to their subordinate with strict sanctions. Subordinates ranks and authority are limited only within their assigned role and capacity. ”

“The main challenge is how to contact the main decision makers or key person for sales” (salesperson A)
5.3.2 Cultural interaction

Salesperson A expressed how cultural interaction occurs when interacting with customers from similar cultural context. Salesperson A expressed that it is possible to know what customers are thinking, their habits and their indirect approaching this situation.

“When we make business, if they are Chinese, for me, I know what they are thinking, what their habits are, Chinese customers are indirect but still very friendly” (salesperson A)

5.3.3 Cultural knowledge

Cultural knowledge enhances better understanding of other cultures, this is also vital for a second repeat of sales. Respondent from salespersons emphasized on characteristics that help to make better decision about the prospective customer’s culture. Hence, socio-cultural situations surrounding all facts about the customers’ is considered to give some cultural knowledge of the customer.

“The people of United States are very straight forward, they say what they want to say, they are not afraid to say what they want, they talk a lot more and if they are happy with something it will reflect right away, there is no guessing of how they feel” (Salesperson D).

Salesperson A stated that cultural knowledge still comes with challenges about understanding what the other counterparts are thinking and how to make them comfortable.

“The main challenge is to understand the other counterpart, what they are thinking and how we can make them comfortable during sales” (salesperson A)

5.4 How sellers intercultural communication competence affected the sales process

5.4.1 Communication style

Sellers and buyers from similar cultural context are very creative and innovative when dealing with customers; they display a sense of being comfortable with current changes than maintaining old systems of doing things. They have skillful capabilities, which enables them to communicate in a way that provides solutions for buyers during sales process.

“In order to serve our customers we work directly our dealers”- (salesperson B).

“i will like to know the people that i am dealing with, i will like to know the customers on a personal level, which means knowing something about their personal life, during the process of knowing the
Australian customers i was able to attend their weddings and also attend their birthday anniversaries”(Salesperson C)

5.4.2 Language

It is obvious that language has a very big factor for the success of intercultural communication competence during sales. Salesperson C and A, emphasized on its relevance by indicating how relevant language skills are important for intercultural communication competence.

“Good level of language skills is required and without language skills there will be no communication and even when there is a language skills competence, the other counterpart still doesn’t understand me as a salesperson, overcoming this challenge is often difficult” (salesperson C)

“First, is good level of English off course its best if you can understand the Chinese language but most of the people speak English” (salesperson A)

5.4.3 Communication skills

Communication skills are required for intercultural communication competence during the sales process and when interacting with similar cultural context. Salesperson D stated also that it is one effective key elements for sales process during interaction.

“It is important that a salesperson have good communication skills and have the ability to sell and negotiate, understand the customers or read about them” (salesperson D)

5.4.4 Trust

Salespersons A and C emphasized on the role of trust for intercultural communication competence. Similarly, good communication establishes the platform for trust by the salespersons and prospective customers from similar cultural context.

“Good communication will guarantee trust because all business is based on trust, good communication helps to builds trust and without good communication there is no guarantee for good business” (Salesperson A)

Although as a salesperson it is important to be open minded, have cultural sensitivity, it also important to display them and show that to our customers in order to build trust which helps to being
able to discuss with customers on things that could not have been able to have been discussed (Salesperson C)

5.4.5 Background and history

In other to have a good intercultural communications competence by salesperson, the need to have an understanding of cultural history was emphasized by salesperson A for customers with similar cultural context.

It is better to read about customer’s history of their culture, political situation and social habits. (Salesperson A)

Table 4: International B2B sales process in different cultural context

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Seller country of origin</th>
<th>Customer country of origin</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Estonia</td>
<td>Russia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Netherland</td>
<td>Japan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Netherland</td>
<td>South Africa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finland</td>
<td>Brazil</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

5.5 Steps of international b2b sales process

5.5.1 Prospecting

Salesperson E explained that during prospecting they identify their customers through different kind of media, exhibition, direct visit or call to customers of dissimilar cultural context during international b2b sales process. Salesperson E also confirms that dealers need to have data about their prospect, which is by keeping a record of customers’ prospects.

“We have to identify the customers through different kind of media, we go to exhibition and visit them directly or we call them” (salesperson E).
“When they are being asked how many machines from our competitors are sold in their region, the customers just don’t have a knowledge of how many machine that is being sold in the region” (salesperson B).

5.5.2 Preapproach

Salespersons C explained during preapproach the sales goals has to be defined, business forecast needs to be made, financial analysis, environmental analysis and the implementation of plan for better international b2b process with customers of dissimilar cultural context.

“When we find dealers, goals are defined; business forecast are made, financial analysis, environmental analysis and implementation of the plan” (salesperson C)

5.5.3 Approach

Salesperson E stated that in order to approach customers with dissimilar cultural context, they take into consideration customers that are interested in change than old-fashioned products.

“We take interest in customers that want to do something different and customers that are interested in change than customers that are interested in old fashioned product, then when we when have identified customers that are interested in change, we start to discuss about what we have and the solutions that we have to offer” (salesperson E)

5.5.4 Presentation

Salesperson E stated that during presentation with customers from dissimilar cultural context, customers need to see the products.

“We then carry out presentation and visit where the customers can see the products, at some point directors from Finland are invited to talk with the CEO of the company. Also, discussion and negotiation about the price against competitors are done within few days” (salesperson E)

5.5.5 Close

Salesperson C similarly confirms that this close confirm if a long term relationship will be made during international b2b sale process with customers of dissimilar cultural context.

“We follow the selling steps and if it is done well then it happens only one time, then long term relation is maintained” (salesperson C).
5.5.6 Follow-up

Salesperson B stated that training, solution and technical support were offered to customers with dissimilar cultural context during international b2b sales process. Salesperson B stated that in order to serve their customers with dissimilar cultural context, they work directly with dealers but also know who their customer are and support them. Salesperson C also supported the issue by indicating that they also support their dealers in order to achieve sales whiles

“Our product is high-tech; we also offer training, solution and technical support” (salesperson B)

“In order to serve our customers we work directly with dealers but we also know our customer and support them” (salesperson B).

“We also support give our dealers in order to achieve sales” (salesperson C).

5.6 How cultural similarities affected the sales process

5.6.1 Cultural association

Salesperson C explained some cultural association considerations that were taken into account when associating with cultures with dissimilar cultural context.

“When doing international b2b sales process with these cultures, there is needs to be some sort of culturally sensitive. I feels convinced that i need to remain myself, since these foreign cultures know that i am not from the same culture with them and at the same time remain diplomatic which means bringing my opinion in a cautious way” (salesperson C).

“As a salesperson from Netherlands my cultures is different from that of south Africa and japan, which means that our culture are very direct, very pragmatic, very open minded, very tolerant and egalitarian, very organized, very efficient compared to japan and south Africa”(salesperson C)

5.6.2 Hierarchy/Power distance

Sales respondent and customers from Russia and Estonia reflects individuals that have different levels of power distance culture. Russians cultural attitudes reflects in business interactions by how they express their status and role during negotiation, their approach to business interaction is usually from top to down. Therefore, those at the top or blow the line of authority in business do not maintain
confidentially in business. In Estonia, decision-making process is different; this is possible by collaborative opinions and suggestion among team members.

“Russian approach to deals affects international b2b sales process because Russian customers have an attitude of discussing price with the competitors and wants to be offered competitors price” (salesperson B)

Customers and sales respondents from Japan and Netherlands reflect a society with dissimilar power distance culture. Japanese customer’s shows higher power distance culture when compared to sales respondent from Netherlands that has a lower power distance cultures. Power distance in japan is reflective of a country with a centralized system of organizational governance when compared to Netherlands with a much lower level of decentralized organizational system. In Japan, experience has shown that stranger’s experience tedious hierarchical level of communication, which corresponds to slow decision-making process from top to bottom of management when compared to Netherlands. Sales respondent from Netherlands show value for teamwork and the opinions of team and decision-making process is faster on like Japan, which is slow.

Sale respondent and customer from Netherlands and South Africa are characterized as individuals that have dissimilar power distance culture. South Africa customers reflects a higher power distance culture when compared to Netherlands sales respondents that has a lower power distance culture. Power distance in South Africa is reflective as a country with a centralized system of organizational governance when compared to Netherlands with decentralized organizational system. South Africa has a tedious hierarchical level of communication which results in slow decision-making process from top to bottom management when compared Netherlands.

“As a salesperson from Netherlands my cultures is different from that of south Africa and japan, which means that our culture are very direct, very pragmatic, very open minded, very tolerant and egalitarian, very organized, very efficient compared to japan and south Africa” (salesperson C)

Sales respondent and customers from Finland and Brazil shows individuals with dissimilar power distance culture. Brazilian customers reveals to have a dissimilar power distance culture when compared to Finland. Brazil is a society that has a complex hierarchy that defines inequalities that is acceptable within the society. Evidence of power holders in the society is justified by the benefits they have over those who are less privileged in the society. Power holder in Brazil command a lot of social respect and they use that to communicate their position in the society. Respect for elderly is
essential and their own children cater for the elderly. In firm, there is one authoritative figure that acts as the boss.

*It is more complicated, but in Finland, the owner knows about the operation of the product whiles in Brazil there are people who are specialized for technical roles with much people assigned to different kinds of role (salesperson E).*

### 5.6.3 Cultural interaction

Some cultural interaction characteristics are necessary for salesperson to interact with dissimilar cultures. Salesperson C explains that cultural sensitivity and being diplomatic when interacting with other cultures are very necessary and helpful during international b2b sales process.

“*there is needs to be some sort of culturally sensitive, i feels convinced that i need to remain myself, since these foreign cultures know that i am not from the same culture with them and at the same time remain diplomatic which means bringing my opinion in a cautious way*” (salesperson C).

Salesperson E explained that during cultural interaction with customers that have dissimilar cultural context, there is the challenge of getting the customers to say what they really think.

“*The main challenge is how to get the customers to say what they really think*” (salesperson E)

Salesperson D explained that when interacting with customers from different cultural context, there is the need to consider cultural background as prerequisite for interaction.

“A *cultural combination of my European background, Estonia and Finnish helps me to better interact with Russian customers*” (salesperson B).

### 5.6.4 Cultural knowledge

Salesperson cultural knowledge about customers enhances better understanding of culture, this is also vital for a second repeat of sales. All respondent from salespersons emphasized that it help to make better decision about the prospective customer’s culture. Hence, socio-cultural situations surrounding all facts about the customers’ is considered to give some cultural knowledge of the customer.

“*Limited knowledge of what is going on in the market*” (Salesperson B).

“In Finland, people take responsibility for situations whiles in brazil everything is drawn to the attention of the director” (salesperson E).
Before going to other cultures, it is important to watch, listen, see, experience and make judgment on how to approach people and cultures. Knowing the history, geographical influences, religion, local politics, economy and characteristics is also important” (salesperson C).

5.7 How sellers intercultural communication competence affected the sales process

5.7.1 Communication style

Communications styles from Sales respondent C and customers with dissimilar cultural context differs, in this case high vs low context cultures reflects communications that is being initiated by emails contacts, call or visit them directly.

“Through emails contacts, call or visit them directly” (salesperson C)

“When communicating it is not enough to communicate by email or phone, it is important to see the customers face to face, to eat with them, drink with them, travel with them, discuss about things not only business” (salesperson C)

5.7.2 Language

Language is an important factor for the success of salesperson intercultural communication competence with dissimilar cultural context. Salesperson C emphasized on its relevance and importance during intercultural communication competence with similar cultural context.

“Good level of language skills is required and without language skills there will be no communication and even when there is a language skills competence, the other counterpart still doesn’t understand me as a salesperson, overcoming this challenge is often difficult” (salesperson C)

5.7.3 Communication skills

Communication skills are important for intercultural communication competence with dissimilar cultural context. Salesperson B and E acknowledges these skills as effective key elements that engages the customers during sales process.

“the most important skills are listening skills and presentation skills, which has to be done in a manner that the customers understand why Firms X solutions is better than any other solutions that is available in demand” (Salesperson E)
“Communications with them enables our firm to know who is who and in what business language to communicate with these customers” (salesperson B)

5.7.4 Trust

Salespersons E, emphasized on the role of trust in communication, since trust establishes good intercultural communication competence.

“We need to be very open minded, as a salesperson i am responsible for the relationship, which means that i am to be able to take care of the relationship with an open-minded attitude” (Salesperson E)

5.7.5 Background and history

In other for salesperson to possess very good intercultural communications competence, they need to have an understanding of cultural background and social intelligence as emphasized by salesperson E and B

social intelligence, logical intelligence is required as key element required for b2b sales, which means that we need to be able to adapt to the situations and people because different people requires different kinds of communication approach (Salesperson E)

Yes, each customer has different cultural background that requires a knowledge of how to interact with him or her. (Salesperson B)

6 DISCUSSION

(Schultz et al, 1999) confirms that differences in buyer/seller management, business standards, and philosophies of buyer/seller firms result in different structures that conflict cultures and sales. (Schultz et al, 1999) stated that in order for salesperson to penetrate the buyer cultural differences and in order to understand these differences, a uniquely designed program that enables the sellers to understand the demands of buyer’s cultures is helpful for international b2b sales process. The major finding of this research reflects that salesperson from the case company have challenges with structure and process of international b2b sales process. Salespersons acknowledged that the process of international b2b sales process requires a structured and systematic approach. The sales respondents came to the realization through interview that the contents and structure of Firm X international b2b sales process requires a systematic approach. The company do not currently have well-documented
steps for international b2b sales process and therefore rely on the experience of new sales persons or exiting sales persons. These sales persons make use of their diverse sales background and experience to interact with customers of different cultures. Hence, the burden of overcoming cultural challenges and skills during the implementation of international b2b sales process rest on the salesperson. (Churchill et al, 1997) stated that sales process is best described as selling activities delivered by the selling activities as stated or carried out by sales people. (Moncrief and Marshall, 2005) confirmed that sales process is a series of interrelated steps, which is referred to as the seven steps of selling composed of prospecting, pre-approach, approach, presentation, objection handling, the close, and follow up. Based on some salespersons previous experience on or before joining firm X, they showed some understanding of the steps of sales.

During prospecting two salesperson, conducting international b2b sales focused on similar and dissimilar cultural context, which seems to have different ways of prospecting customer’s one salesperson focused dissimilar cultural context noted that this is done with the help of media, exhibition and direct visit to the customer. While on the other hand, a database, which contains a list of prospect in different areas, are retrieved by salesperson.

During preapproach two salesperson conducting international b2b sales process with similar and dissimilar cultural context, seem to have different ways of conducting preapproach with customers. Salesperson focused on similar cultural context explained that they first need to read newspapers, read the website and magazine to find out about what customers need and where they are and that they need to know more about the different cultures of the customers and the habits of customers to better understand them. Salesperson focused on dissimilar cultural context explained that goals need to be defined; business forecast need to be made, financial analysis conducted and environmental analysis are considered before the implementation of the plan.

Three salesperson conducting international b2b sales process from similar and dissimilar cultural context seem to have different method for approaching customers during international b2b sales. Two salespersons from similar cultural context explained that they know that customers need their product but the main challenge is how to contact that decision makers or the key person for sales. Perhaps the other sales person focused on similar cultural context indicated that every time he had a chance to talk to the customers, he uses that opportunity to explain about the product to the customers.

Two salesperson that were focused on customers with similar cultural context explained that they embarked on international b2b sales process with customers by applying different presentation
methods which includes, lots of demonstration, email contact and advertisement through print media and internet display of their products to customers. In addition, one salesperson indicated that they also take advantage of the several advertising tools such as, magazines, internet, different events and shows where new prospects are found through a platform to present the firm product. Salesperson focused on customers with dissimilar cultural context indicated that they carry out presentation and visit where the customers can see the products and at some point, directors from Finland were invited to talk with the CEO of the company. In addition, discussion and negotiation about the price against competitors are done within few days.

Two salesperson that were focused on customers with similar cultural context explained that the close stage of the international b2b sales process shows evidence that clients will request, purchase more or they can recommend firm X to other customers once good relationship are established with the customers. Whiles the other salesperson explained that the close stage assumes that the pre-close were done rightly; there will be no short cut or tricks to close the deal because it requires a natural step by step process where the customer will indicate if he is interested. Finally, one sales person confirmed that the pre-close stage with customers of dissimilar cultures confirms what the result of the close stage will reflect the end result, which mean establishing long-term relationship.

Two salesperson that were focused on customers with similar cultural context showed more practical understanding of the follow up stage of the international b2b sales process by offering the customers training about the Firm X product and the customer is also introduced to those in firm X for any further help. The salesperson focused on similar cultures offer support to their dealers with all the marketing and sales information’s that they need which includes the price list, sales sheets, sales folders and giving them access to all the material through dealers platform. Salesperson focused on dissimilar cultural context explained that in order to follow up on their clients, they offer trainings, solutions and technical support because Firm X product are high tech product. Another salesperson indicated that the follow up stage of the sales process with customers of dissimilar cultural context requires that they need to work directly with the dealers but also know the customers and support them. Lastly, one sales person also focused on customers with dissimilar cultures also confirms the need to support the dealers in other to achieve sales.

The international b2b sales process requires a step-by-step process in orders to achieve sales. The salesperson from chosen case firm have applied some considerable amount of the international b2b sales process whiles omitting the “objection handling” stage which is also a critical part of the sales process. However, salespersons from the chosen case firm, either focused on similar or dissimilar
cultural context of the sales process seems to have little or no clue on the practical implementation of the objection handling stage. (Moncrief and Marshall 2005) stated that objections can generally be defined as a when customer enquiries and indecisions is reported about the company product or company. The interviewed salespersons have not been able to provide information’s that offers customers with the platform where dealers can report enquiries and indecisions about the company or products. This stage of the sales process should provide customers with the platform where they can quickly report any objection that they find needful to the salespersons concerned. Salesperson must take into consideration that they are dealing with different customers from different cultural context, which may be similar or dissimilar to the salespersons cultures. Therefore, information about Firm X products or services are perceived from different cultural context. The objection handling stage of the sales process is the stage where the salesperson have the privilege of explaining in clearer terms how to offer the best services or product possible to suit the needs of a particular customer.

Despite the omission of the objection handling stage of the sales process, the result reflects how international b2b sales process where done when salesperson considered similar and dissimilar cultural context. When sales process are conducted with similar or dissimilar cultural context, certain attributes and tools makes it easier to achieve a deal.

During the prospecting stage, access to media technology plays a critical unique role in prospecting with similar cultural context easier. Salesperson can easily go online to search for information about their dealers. This real time information gives the salesperson information about their prospect. For example, firm from similar cultural context in Europe have possible access to information from media platforms of the European stock exchange and the likes. Because European markets make use of similar currencies, logistics and policies governing sales process, salesperson would find it easier to translate the information that are found on the media platforms and conduct sales easily. However, when salesperson conducts prospecting with dissimilar cultures, salesperson would need to exchange hard copy information that would explains in details what needs to be known or dissimilar in cultural context about policies governing other market to conduct sales. For example, when Finnish firm and some African firm have some sales interaction there is partial guarantee to access the required information and policies governs them differently. This may require the Finnish salesperson to request some hard copy material that may give further credible information’s about the firm in some African country that has limited access to information from available media like the internet. This different sales process could be challenging if the time to get prospects is taken into consideration.
When salesperson makes an approach to customers with similar cultures, there is that sense of knowing how the customer would perceive the firms offers. When a Finnish salesperson contacts customers from similar cultural context like Norway or Sweden, he instantly could have a perceived understanding of what to expect during the approach level of the sales process. This makes it easier for the salesperson to prepare for this kind of similar match of cultures. Unlike the dissimilar cultural context. The approach level could be learned or the use of salespersons from the opposite cultures could serve as an alternative solution to the challenges attached with approach.

Again, access to technology play a major key role in presenting the Firm X product to customers with similar products. This means that firm X salesperson where able to rely on the use of email, phone call and internet for presentation. This makes presentation of services and products save time with similar cultural context and may resort to visit as when needed because the customer already has a pre-knowledge of the product from internet. Salesperson from dissimilar cultural context resort to visiting the customers. Firms X confirms that they need to invite the directors at some point to come make presentation. This later kind of sales process is often possible with firm X salesperson with a firm in Africa.

It is clear and easy to implement the close stage of the sales process when sales persons meet customers with similar cultural context, this is why firm X sales person assumes to know the possible result of the close stage and know what to do at the close stage. With dissimilar cultural context, the close stage of the international b2b sales process does not guarantee a pre-knowledge for the salesperson interacting with the opposite cultures to know the result of a deal. However, firm X salesperson focusing on dissimilar cultural context seeks to depend on applying what it considers as the right sales process to accomplish sales.

At this stage, because firm X product is a high tech product, there is usually similar offer of follow up activities for similar or dissimilar cultural context, which involves mainly training on how to use the product. However, the difference is that when it comes to Firm X salespersons dealing with dissimilar cultures, more attentions are given to the dealers and the customers to give follow up support.

(Bush and Ingram, 2001) indicated that when sellers and buyers from different national cultures come together to interact during buyer–seller situation, their shared values, pattern of thinking and actions during the interactions are usually divergent. (Bush and Ingram, 2001) explained that this situation comes with the initial challenge of common grounds of understanding, which results to increased
degree of uncertainty and therefore limits the efficiency of communication. (Schultz et al, 1999) stated that knowledge about the buyer’s norms, customs, social, economic and political systems helps reduce uncertainty and enhances sellers’ intercultural communication competence.

Cultural association with customers enables salespersons to understand cultural diversity when salesperson meet with customers from similar or dissimilar cultures. Being sensitive and diplomatic was noted by one salesperson as a way to deal with cultures he considers different from his own culture. This is because of diversity in cultures. There could be no better way to understand these diversities without associating other cultures, especially when sales is concerned. Imagine a very direct, very pragmatic, very open minded, very tolerant, egalitarian, very organized, very efficient culture compared to Japan and South Africa as one salesperson noted. He understood that sensitivity plays a key role in understanding how these other cultural context associate culturally. Salesperson associating with similar cultural context explained that there is that curiosity to know each other background. In addition, salesperson explained that when dealing with similar cultures, association is almost similar. Similar cultures have a sense of being interested in each other background because it help the salesperson and the customer to understand whom and how to associate with each other, that is why the process seems similar.

When salespersons from power/hierarchy distance cultures meet with customers from similar cultures those in managerial positions from these cultures exhibits similar role as facilitators and give their subordinates authority to act in their capacity as with one salesperson from similar cultures confirmed the support gotten to go into new market area as subordinate. These similar cultures encourage teams work and opinions of teams are highly appreciated. Salesperson from Netherlands has culture that is different from that of South Africa and Japan, which means that their culture are very direct, very pragmatic, very open minded, very tolerant and egalitarian, very organized, very efficient compared to Japan and South Africa.

Cultural interaction by sales persons from similar cultural context seems to have more understanding because the salesperson and the customers from these similar cultures understands the strength and weakness behind their cultures. Therefore, initial cultural interaction between these two similar cultures have a good platform to initiate interaction based on the previous knowledge about each other cultures. One salesperson from similar cultures confirms that upon initial cultural interaction he knows what these cultures are thinking and what habits they have. Chinese salesperson to Chinese customers are indirect but still very friendly.
Some salespersons from dissimilar cultural context have expressed the challenge of not knowing what the customers are thinking. Little or no understanding of national cultures leaves the salesperson with difficulties during cultural interaction and this makes it difficult not to perceive what the customer might be thinking during a particular international b2b sales situation. When a salesperson ignore some non-verbal clues expressed by a customer’s during this situation he or she is likely to miss some important messages or clues that explains what the customers might be thinking at the time of international b2b sales situation. For example salesperson communicating with customers with no eye contacts is a reflection that there may be lack of interest in what the customers might have as a concern.

Salesperson also indicated that being sensitive to cultural red flag avoids conflict of interest when dealing with customers from dissimilar cultures. For example, most salespersons indicated that these red flags ranges of political and religious views, which may conflict with the view of the salesperson. When salesperson views on politics and religion discuss does not matches or support that of the customer’s view during international b2b sales interaction, the customers may view it differently as being offensive. A Russia customer once asked the Estonia salesperson about his political view about NATO. Obviously, if the salesperson contribution is not in favor of the customer’s view it will definitely affect sales. Therefore, the sensitivity of the salesperson is an important tool to uncover customer’s expectation.

Cultural knowledge enhances better understanding of other cultures with similar or dissimilar cultural context. Salesperson from similar cultural context have similar characteristics (Finland vs USA). One salesperson explained that the people of United States are very straightforward, they say what they want to say, they are not afraid to say what they want, they talk a lot more and if they are happy with something it will reflect right away and there is no guessing of how they feel. Salesperson with dissimilar cultural context with customers show limited knowledge of what is going on in the customers market, taking responsibility for sales with customers from dissimilar cultural context is different. One salesperson noted that in Finland, people take responsibility for situations whiles in Brazil everything is drawn to the attention of the director while another salesperson indicated that before going to other cultures, it is important to watch, listen, see, experience and make judgment on how to approach people and cultures. Knowing the history, geographical influences, religion, local politics, economy and characteristics is also important.

Communication style between sales respondent and customer from Netherland verses Australia and Finland verses USA requires that the seller and buyer is told everything that needs to be known about
a product or service. One salesperson noted that in order to communicate with customers and serve customers, sellers work directly with dealers directly. Another salesperson stated how communication is done with customers and salesperson with similar cultural context. He explained that he likes to know the people that he is dealing with, and that he did like to know the customers on a personal level, which means knowing something about their personal life. He further explained that during the process of knowing the Australian customers, he would attend the customer weddings and attend their birthday anniversaries. Communication style can be personal with customers and salesperson with similar cultural context because they often have common characteristics they share. Another salesperson indicated that communication style with dissimilar culture through phone calls or email is not enough but also requires visiting them. One thing that is unique about visiting the customers is that the salesperson can see the customers and practically sense from firsthand what they customer implies during sales interaction.

One salesperson that also focused on similar cultural context stated that good level of language skills is required and without language skills there will be no communication whiles another salesperson focused on similar cultural context explained that good level of English or native language is required for communicating with similar cultural context. Another salesperson that focused on dissimilar cultural context also confirmed that good level of language skills is required and without language, skills there will be no communication. Imagine salespersons going to a similar or dissimilar cultural context without any language skills, sales process and interaction can be difficult when salesperson have no clue of what is being discussed during sales interaction.

Salespersons that focused on similar and dissimilar cultural context agreed that an understanding of language enable interactions during sales process. However, they also noted that the challenges associated with interpreting new language lies with the interpreter being able to interpret accurately what the customers and salesperson have discussed during international b2b sales process interaction. This is because when a third party interprets another customers language there is a possible chance of omission of commission of meaning that is different from the original meaning of what the customer said. When this happens, there is often a lack of understanding about the salespersons expectation from the customer, which may be different from the intended expectations of the salesperson during sales interaction with customers.

Communication skill is required for intercultural communication competence with customers from dissimilar or similar cultural context. One salesperson that focused on sales process with similar cultural context stated that it is important that a salesperson have good communication skills and have
the ability to sell and negotiate, understand the customers or read about them. Salespersons that focused on customers with dissimilar cultural context explained that the most important skills are listening skills and presentation skills, which has to be done in a manner that the customers understand why Firms X solutions is better than any other solutions that is available in demand. Lastly, another salesperson that focused on customers with dissimilar cultural context noted that communications enables firm X to know who is who and in what business language to communicate with these customers.

Seller from these low context cultures understands that tone of voice during communication is an important aspect of communication skill during buyer-seller interaction. Buyer and seller from Netherland verses Australia and Finland verses USA take into consideration many external surrounding factors of sales process, they also screen out what to communicate and translate context into meaning. Based on each salesperson experience and strong background from international b2b sales process, some salesperson seems to identify the need for useful communication skills for international b2b sales process. However, some salesperson where not able to identify much relevant communication skills they find useful or have used for interacting with customer from diverse cultures.

Salespersons emphasized on the role of trust for intercultural communication competence based on customers that have similar cultural context. One salesperson that focused on similar cultural context indicated that, good communication establishes the platform for trust between the salespersons and prospective customers. In addition, another salesperson that focused on customers with similar cultural context stated that it is important to be open-minded, have cultural sensitivity. Salesperson further stated that it also important to display them and show to customers, which helps in being able to discuss with customers on things, which could not have been discussed if not for trust. Another salesperson that focused on international sales process with dissimilar cultural context explained that it is important to be very open minded, as a salesperson, he is responsible for the relationship, which means that means the he is able to take care of the relationship with an open-minded attitude. No one will feel comfortable doing international b2b sales with someone he does not trust. Trust is a valuable character or attributes that guarantees possibility for a repeat of sales and purchase of goods and services by customers.

According to one salespersons, he stated that understanding of customer’s background and history is required for international b2b sales interaction. Social intelligence, logical intelligence or even reading about these diverse cultures, especially when it is similar or dissimilar enables salesperson to
understand background and history of customers. Salesperson understood that each countries they conduct international b2b sales process have different levels and expressions of cultural challenges. It is even difficult in the early stages as expressed by one respondent who explained that the variation in language accent often gives different meaning and understanding to the customers.

7 CONCLUSIONS

This section reflects on the researcher’s view on international b2b sales process and offer information to case study firm. One of the major challenge for case company is its inability to have a well-documented process of international b2b sales process for each country region or country it operates. The absence of a well-documented policy for international b2b sales process for the case firm leaves a vacuum for appropriate structures and policy for new and current salesperson. The reliance of experienced salesperson with background on international b2b sales maybe good in the short term. However, to make the case company more attractive for promising new sales persons with a career focused on international b2b sales, a well-documented practical knowledge of international b2b sales process is required.

The over reliance on dealers to support international b2b sales process of the case firm comes with its advantage and disadvantages. Off course, there is usually cost consideration when hiring new salesperson from the country or region that have practical understanding of the country or region of focus for international b2b sales process. However, this research shows that dealers do not give much commitment and consideration on firm X international b2b sales success since they are mainly after their own interest and profit. For example, it is not clear that dealers are doing much job in trying to improve competitor’s market knowledge for case firm. Hence, if case firm have a well-structured dealer-firms’ relationship, it will enable firm to gain knowledge about competitors it hopes to improve its international b2b sales process. Alternatively, international b2b sales process is easier when case firm hires new salespersons with a career interest in sales; they have the potential to show commitment and focus on competitor’s market knowledge for firm X and a commitment to maintain the firm policy whiles dealing with customer’s from new cultures.

There is very minimal current international b2b sales process system used to track the progress of dealers operating in new cultures, this situation widens the gap of international b2b sales process success with case company and customers. During the interview one salesperson expressed concern about limited access to market information from competitors.
Case company may focus more on employing and training its own salesperson that will represent them in the country or region of focus and as such handle dealer’s role on international b2b sales process. The benefits salesperson recruit is to take direct responsibility of giving current market situation about international b2b sale process based on firm x established policy. A good way to do so would be to enhance collaboration with universities in Finland by searching for promising international b2b sales student that has interest and background in international sales. Offering research and development opportunities to institutions that could help expand new knowledge about culture and communication.

8 VALIDITY AND RELIABILITY OF RESEARCH

Case study research is one form of an empirical research. Previous literature has suggested that the evaluating process of results should consist of four tests that reveal the quality of any empirical social study. Accordingly, the researcher should focus on construct validity, internal validity, external validity and reliability. Previous literature has presented various tactics to facilitate the four tests of empirical studies (Yin 2003, p. 33-34).

The construct validity is about “establishing correct operational measures for the concepts being studied” and this can be challenging especially for case studies. To avoid subjective judgements (Yin, 2003, p. 33-34) has suggested that scholars should have multiple sources of evidence; establish a chain of evidence; and to have key informants to review the case study.

To utilize the first approach, this master’s thesis has collected the empirical data from multiple sources. Selected salespersons from firm X that are engaged in international sales process, the firm home pages was examined and lastly other valuable data from annual reports to power point presentations were taken into account.

The structure of the thesis proceeds systematically and create a sequence of evidence from the introductory to the concluding chapter. This logic behind this sequence is to enable the reader of the thesis comprehend with ease the overall representation of the study and information as being valid because of the sequence of evidence. Lastly, to avoid any misunderstandings and wrong interpretations in the final version, the interviewees have reviewed the case study drafts.

The need for internal validity test is not required, since this master’s thesis does not focus on causal relationship within the firm salespersons, instead, external validity test became the focus and with associated challenge in the research design. According to (Yin, 2003, p.37) the case study focuses on
analytical details by providing results from the international sales process of the selected Finnish firm. Replication logic test the findings of the case study objects (i.e. salesperson conducting international sales process for the firm).

Finally, reliability of the study came into consideration when designing the empirical data collection process. The researcher considered phenomenon, interviewees, researchers change and its varying challenges to accomplish absolute reliability. Every research should aim at findings that are as trustworthy as possible. According to (Lincoln and Guba, 1985) trustworthiness in qualitative research can be tested using four criteria, which includes credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability, credibility is concerned with the truth of the studied data and interpretations that have been made. The next criteria that is associated to the first one makes it impossible to achieve credibility without dependability. This standard refers to the ability to obtain research findings if the research repeats its process with same or similar case and context.

It is important to maintain objectivity during the research, whiles confirmability is associated with the challenge. The empirical findings received from interviews with supplementary materials should contain the views of the studied objects, not the opinions or prejudices of the researcher. Therefore, it is also important to aim at transferability to assure that the analyses not generalized. Even though the case study method does not aim at universal generalizability, it is important to provide adequate research report for the future researchers (Lincoln and Guba, 1985).

9 LIMITATIONS

Several limitations that existed in this master’s thesis when evaluating the results. The study took place in Finland, which is a small and open economy, which differs from other larger economies. Although there were no specific industry requirements for the case firm, isalmi is the place of the firms search and study. Limited resources posed a challenge for the researcher to travel for interview; alternatively, the conduct for the interviews was via skype call application.

Time constraints and limited amount of firms focused on international b2b sales in the region influenced the decision of the researcher choice of firm. Particularly the overlapping duties of salespersons influenced the decision of the chosen firm that was selected for this master’s thesis as some salesperson categorically notified the researcher about how busy they are and do not have time to engage in student research. Even though the case firm was succeeding relatively well, during the interview moment their long-term success is unknown and therefore the long-term influences of international sales process operations is uncertain as well. The participating firm that accepted to take
part in this study have and acquired lots of success, which reflect in brand name and has shown its potential in becoming sustained success for the future.

In addition, the interviewees were able to provide in-depth data for the following empirical part based on the research theme. At the same time, it was important to acquire information about the history of the firm and therefore the international b2b sales process perspective. The studied firm operated in business environments, industries and with different customers (mostly with b2b and often times b2c) which reflects in its size as a relatively large firm.

The case firm operation and growth have occurred at different periods based on the narratives of the director that growth has occurred from the beginning of 1970 to 2015. Therefore, the reader should consider these findings with caution.

Researcher’s previous experience of the case analysis method was also limited and therefore it is conceivable that something important may have missed when analyzing the empirical data. Despite the relatively arduous empirical part, the chosen research and analysis methods eventually found applicable and efficient for the current research problem and questions.

REFERENCES

Articles


BOOKS


WEBSITE


www.kuopioinnovation.fi

APPENDIX 1

Salesperson background

a. Could you briefly tell me about your work history?

b. How many years of sales experience do you have?

c. What is your job description in Firm X?

d. What is your country of birth?

e. Could you please define your national culture?

f. What is your age?

Theme 1: How does salesperson conduct international B2B sales process?


Need and problem identification

↓

Presentation and demonstration
b. Could you describe the steps that you take to conduct international B2B sales process?

c. Could you describe any challenges you encounter while following your international B2B sales process?

d. Do you currently have any need to improve upon your international B2B sales process?

**Theme 2:** How does salesperson conduct B2B international sales process when cultural diversity between seller and buyer is high or low?

*International B2B sales process are conducted within high and low cultural context, context refers to information that surrounds these events of sales process, for example, individual characters between two different national cultures classified as high and low.*

Could you please name the customer’s national culture?

a. Describe your sales process within this particular customer?

b. Describe how the national culture of this customer affects sales process?

c. Describe some cultural challenges encountered during the sales process?

d. How important is cultural experience for international B2B sales process?
Secondly, I would like you to choose one customer whose national culture is very similar to yours. I am looking for low cultural diversity between you and the customer.

a. Describe your sales process with this particular customer?

b. Describe how the national culture of this customer affects sales process?

c. Describe some cultural challenges encountered during the sales process?

d. How important is cultural experience for international B2B sales process?

**Theme 3:** How does salesperson intercultural communication competence affects the sales process when cultural diversity between seller and customer is high or low?

*Salesperson require skills, attitude, motivation and knowledge associated with intercultural communication to conduct international B2B sales process:*

a. What kind of communication skills do you need to conduct international B2B sales process?

b. How do these communication skills vary during the seven steps of selling?

c. What kind of knowledge related to cultures do you need in order to conduct international B2B sales process?

d. Do you need different kind of cultural knowledge during the seven steps of selling?

e. What kind of motivation related to communication do you need during the sales process?

f. Do you need different kind of motivation during the seven steps of selling?

g. What kind of attitude related to communication do you need during the sales process?

h. Describe some challenges encountered with intercultural communication competence during international B2B sales process?

Is there anything else you want to say? On the other hand, would you like to add something?

Thank you for your time.
APPENDIX 2

INFORMED CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN A RESEARCH STUDY

You are being asked to volunteer in a research study, please read this form and ask any questions that you may have before agreeing to take part in this study.

Thesis title: The Impact of cultural diversity and seller’s intercultural communication competence on international sales process

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Purpose of this research study:

a. Investigate how and describe how international B2B sales process is conducted.
b. Investigate how and describe how cultural diversity affects international B2B sales process.
c. Investigate and describe how intercultural communication competence affects international B2B sales process.

Procedure

If you agree to this research, a 30-45 minutes interview will be conducted, recorded and transcribed. A copy of interview transcript will also be forwarded to you to confirm the accuracy of information obtained.

Risk and benefits of being in the study

There are no foreseeable risk to participate in this research. The benefit to participate are that you will express your opinion anonymously on issues of international sales process which enable one to
understand how knowledge, skills and attitude affects international B2B sales process. It is also important because it examines how different cultures interact in sales process.

**Anonymity**

Since you didn’t signed or signed up a sheet or any other form that includes your name, your participation in this study is completely anonymous. Because your response from interview will be combined with other information from theory your responses will be virtually impossible to separate from theory.

**Voluntary nature of the study.**

Participation in this study is voluntary. You decision whether or not to participate will not result in penalty or loss to which you are entitled. If you decide to participate, you are free not to answer any question at any time or withdraw at any time.

**Contact and questions**

The research conducting this study can be contacted on ucheo@uef.fi. You are encouraged to contact the researcher if you have any questions.

*Should any problem arise in the course of this study, you may contact the supervisor at:*

Jonna Koponen FT] PhD  
Yliopistonlehtori | University Lecturer  
Itä-Suomen yliopisto | University of Eastern Finland  
Kauppatieteiden laitos | Business School  
Kv-liiketoiminta ja myynnin johtaminen | International Business and Sales Management  
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You will be given a copy of this information for your record. If a copy of this consent form is not provided to you, please request one.