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The flexibility of salespeople and management teams: How they interact and influence performance during the COVID-19 pandemic

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ABSTRACT

This research examines the effect of salespeople's functional flexibility on sales performance during the COVID-19 pandemic. Grounded in the contingency approach to management and the person-environment fit theory, we analyze whether the flexibility of the management team with which salespeople work moderates the effect of their functional flexibility on sales performance. The study collected data from a sample of 227 salespeople in 120 sales organizations in Bangkok, Thailand. Partial least squares structural equation modeling was used in data analysis. Although the results from the model estimation support the significant positive association between salespeople's functional flexibility and sales performance, the moderating effect analysis clarifies that the positive association is present only among salespeople who work with a management team that is highly flexible. When salespeople work with a management team with low flexibility, their functional flexibility is not related positively to sales performance.

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1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has forced companies around the world to adjust their business strategies and operations to be more responsive to environmental and market changes (Afrianty et al., 2021; Ashraf, 2020; Charoensukmongkol & Suthatorn, 2022; Suthatorn & Charoensukmongkol, 2022). The pandemic's effects have affected sales organizations that engage in international sales particularly. Because the restriction in cross-border travel has made it more difficult for these organizations to conduct business overseas, many of them have had to adjust their sales strategy to focus more on consumers in the domestic market. However, the economic effect and the market disruption attributable to the pandemic have created significant changes in the market and consumer behaviors, which make it more difficult to manage sales activities and competition (Charoensukmongkol, 2022a). Some organizations have had to adjust their sales by introducing new

product lines that can generate higher market demand during the pandemic (Rangarajan et al., 2021). Many have also changed the way they gain access to customers by adopting information technology and online platforms for market communication (Hartmann & Lussier, 2020). For salespeople who engaged extensively in international sales before the pandemic, the abrupt changes in the market have altered the way they perform their sales tasks significantly. In particular, the disruption has made their sales tasks more onerous and complicated. Not only do they still need to maintain sales with their foreign customers, but they also must initiate new sales in domestic markets and interact with more diverse groups of customers. In addition, these salespeople must learn how to use technology and new sales methods to cope with the changing market conditions. Under these circumstances, they must have the ability to handle various aspects of tasks to adapt effectively to this changing environment.

Considering the challenges that salespeople have encountered during the COVID-19 pandemic, this research proposes that one particular ability that may be essential for salespeople to perform effectively under these unfavorable market conditions is *functional flexibility*. Functional flexibility can be defined broadly as the ability to accomplish a large number of diverse tasks (van den Berg & van der Velde, 2005). Previous research has shown that functional

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flexibility tends to be the most critical skill that employees need to possess, particularly during times of crisis and environmental uncertainty (Evans & Bahrami, 2020; Sohi et al., 2020). Studies have also shown that functional flexibility enhances various aspects of employees' competencies that are required to adapt effectively (Anser et al., 2021; Avgoustaki, 2017; Desombre et al., 2006; Waheed et al., 2021). Because this ability helps employees undertake a large number of diverse tasks effectively, it should be the essential skill that allows salespeople to manage the unexpected changes in their work and handle the challenge in the sales environment during this pandemic very well.

However, despite the findings available about the benefits of employees' functional flexibility, some research gaps still exist. Firstly, while we know that functional flexibility is important because it helps employees in several occupational groups enhance their competencies and work performance (Au et al., 2019; Liu & Lin, 2019), little is known about the role of functional flexibility in the performance of salespeople who have encountered drastic changes in their sales activities during a crisis. Secondly, the literature still lacks adequate knowledge about the boundary conditions that could constrain or intensify the effect of employees' functional flexibility on performance outcomes. To date, the study that has analyzed the boundary condition of functional flexibility is that of Martínez-Sánchez et al. (2008), which found that the level of inter-organizational cooperation moderated the effect of employees' functional flexibility on firm innovative performance significantly. McComb et al. (2007) also found that project complexity intensified the positive effect of team member flexibility on team effectiveness. Still, there is no evidence in the literature about the boundary condition with respect to the management characteristics that could play a dominant role in determining the significance of the effect of salespeople's functional flexibility on work performance. These are the main issues that will be clarified in our study.

The objective of this research is to examine the effect of salespeople's functional flexibility on work performance by using the case of salespeople who have encountered changes in the market environment and their sales tasks during the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition, we adopt the contingency approach to management (Fiedler, 1978) and the person-environment fit theory (Edwards, 2008; Edwards & Shipp, 2007) to investigate the moderating role of the management team flexibility as a boundary condition that might influence the effect of salespeople's functional flexibility on sales performance. The flexibility of the management team is proposed as a potential moderator because of the dominant role that the management team plays in shaping work policies that affect the work behaviors of employees in the organization (Yukl, 2010). As the work policy the management team sets can determine employees' work behaviors, we propose that the congruence between the characteristics of the management team and those of the employees with respect to flexibility can demonstrate whether employees' functional flexibility enhances their performance. This rationale is supported by prior research that has shown that when employees' working style is consistent with that of their supervisor, it provides a supportive condition that allows employees to work more effectively and achieve better outcomes (Byza et al., 2019). On the other hand, the converse conditions can create obstacles that prevent employees from performing their tasks effectively and affect their performance adversely (Marstand et al., 2017). In particular, we propose that salespeople's functional flexibility can help them achieve higher sales performance only when they work with a management team that also exhibits a high level of flexibility. However, when salespeople work with a management team that exhibits low flexibility, their functional flexibility may have a negative effect on sales performance. From the perspective of a

management team with low flexibility, the high functional flexibility that their salespeople demonstrate may be perceived as unacceptable conduct. Thus, salespeople with high functional flexibility may not receive support from a management team with low flexibility. Considering the highly uncertain market during the pandemic, lack of management support may limit functionally flexible salespeople's potential to achieve better performance through their flexible working practices.

With respect to the research contribution, we expect that the results of our study will provide additional evidence to support the benefits of functional flexibility in the situational context that have not yet been proven. In fact, although the study of Liu and Lin (2019) provided some evidence of the direct effect of the management team flexibility on employees' flexibility, no research has provided evidence to clarify whether management team flexibility can be a moderating variable that influences the effect of salespeople's functional flexibility on sales performance. Thus, our results are also expected to provide more understanding about the role the management team plays that may influence the benefit that employees obtain from functional flexibility.

2. Literature review and hypotheses

2.1. Salespeople's functional flexibility

Functional flexibility is defined as an individual's ability to accomplish a large number of diverse tasks efficiently (van den Berg & van der Velde, 2005). Typically, salespeople who can function flexibly work more effectively on different tasks under diverse circumstances. Their functional flexibility helps them learn and adapt quickly when they are assigned new and unfamiliar tasks (van den Berg & van der Velde, 2005). Furthermore, their ability minimizes the costs and time incurred when they have to shift to new tasks or functional roles (van den Berg & van der Velde, 2005). Campion et al. (1996) also suggested that functional flexibility is beneficial for an organization because it helps its employees fill in for each other as needed. When employees have the flexibility to perform each other's tasks, then it boosts productivity and effectiveness in the workplace (Campion et al., 1993). Functional flexibility becomes more essential when high uncertainty and unexpected changes occur in a market environment (Au et al., 2019). For example, Au et al. (2019) provided evidence that supported the benefits of functional flexibility in helping firms that operate in high-risk markets respond effectively to exogenous shocks and thus achieve higher performance.

Functional flexibility is also the characteristic that determines salespeople's ability to respond to changes in the firm's environment (Au et al., 2019). In particular, it promotes their ability to develop work-related competencies and enhance work performance (Desombre et al., 2006). Some scholars have shown that functional flexibility can be associated with a wide repertoire of competences, such as problem-solving skill and innovative behavior (Avgoustaki, 2017; Wright & Snell, 1998). For example, the study of Anser et al. (2021) that was conducted in the manufacturing sector reported that functional flexibility of staffs contributed significantly to their development of innovative work behavior. Similarly, Waheed et al. (2021) found that nurses who exhibited high functional flexibility tended to demonstrated high levels of creativity in their work. Desombre et al. (2006) conducted a case study among healthcare personnel and found that functional flexibility of healthcare personnel enhanced the quality of service they provided to patients. Lastly, Avgoustaki (2017) found that functional flexibility of employees also minimized stress when extensive effort was required in the job.

2.2. Salespeople's functional flexibility and sales performance

Given these benefits of functional flexibility that previous literature has supported, it should be a critical characteristic of salespeople that allows them to deal effectively with the market disruption and the change in their sales tasks during the pandemic. According to [Evans and Bahrami \(2020, p. 207\)](#), "flexibility is intuitively valued as a means of dynamically adapting to uncertainty." This role of functional flexibility is also supported by [Liu and Lin \(2019, p. 2\)](#) who proposed that "employees with highly flexible capabilities and intentions are better able to adapt to changing work patterns and to deal with the demands placed on them." Because salespeople who are functionally flexible can apply their skills and competencies to perform diverse and multiple tasks ([Au et al., 2019](#)), they can rely on a wide range of appropriate behaviors to adapt rapidly and effectively when they have to cope with a variety of new sales situations and unfamiliar groups of customers ([Charoensukmongkol & Suthatorn, 2021](#)). Further, [Liu and Lin \(2019\)](#) suggested that functional flexibility allowed individuals to engage in extra role requirements without difficulty. Accordingly, they tend to be more efficient in undertaking additional work responsibilities and more productive when performing multiple work roles. Moreover, given that salespeople with high functional flexibility tend to solve problems and make decisions more creatively ([Avgoustaki, 2017](#)), they are able to develop innovative approaches to manage the unexpected sales challenges that they encounter ([Zhou & Charoensukmongkol, 2022](#)). Moreover, [Waheed et al. \(2021\)](#) argued that individuals with high functional flexibility are basically polychronic; this propensity allows them to develop diverse skills necessary to cope with a variety of novel sales situations.

Overall, these characteristics of salespeople with high functional flexibility may contribute to their potential to cope well with the market changes and work responsibilities that differ from those before the pandemic, and thereby allow them to achieve strong sales performance. For example, when salespeople are required to work with customers using communication technology and online applications extensively rather than face-to-face interactions, those with high functional flexibility tend to have no difficulty learning the way to use and apply the technology in their sales. In particular, their flexibility allows them to adjust the way they interact with customers through the online applications more quickly and appropriately so that they perform well under the new normal. Moreover, salespeople's functional flexibility is essential when they are required to switch to the new target markets and product lines that were introduced during the pandemic. When they are functionally flexible, salespeople can learn effectively about the new target markets and consumer behaviors that changed significantly during the market disruption. This benefit of functional flexibility helps them make rapid adjustments to the new market environment and allows them to perform well in sales despite the novel sales situations they face. On the other hand, those who lack functional flexibility tend to have difficulty changing their familiar work roles. They may cling to the old sales approach they used before the pandemic and be unable to respond quickly and effectively to the new market environment. In this respect, lack of flexibility can be an obstacle that prevents salespeople from making appropriate adjustments to manage the market changes during the new normal. Therefore, salespeople's functional flexibility is expected to have a positive effect on the sales performance they achieve during the COVID-19 pandemic.

This leads to the following hypothesis:

H1. Salespeople's functional flexibility is associated positively with sales performance.

2.3. Moderating effect of management team flexibility

Although salespeople's functional flexibility can promote their sales performance, there may be certain situational factors that help them use their ability more effectively to enhance their sales performance. To be more specific, this research focuses on the role of the management team flexibility as the moderating factor. In general, [Günsel and Açıkgöz \(2013, p. 362\)](#) defined flexibility at the team level as "the collective ability of a work group or a team to respond effectively and efficiently and to adapt to business and technological changes." [McComb et al. \(2007\)](#) conceptualized team flexibility as the capability of a team to make adjustments, function effectively in a dynamic environment, and produce a variety of solutions. On the other hand, some scholars have conceptualized team flexibility from the perspective of resource utilization. For example, [Lee and Xia \(2005\)](#) viewed team flexibility as the ability of a team to utilize its resources (e.g., knowledge, expertise, and capabilities) effectively and efficiently to respond to a changing environment. Similarly, [Yuan et al. \(2010\)](#) viewed team flexibility as the capability of a team to coordinate and commit resources quickly to new courses of action in response to changes. Lastly, team flexibility is also conceptualized in terms of proactive flexibility and reactive flexibility ([Li et al., 2010](#)). While the former focuses on the ability of a team to make adjustments to prepare for future changes, the latter represents the ability of a team to make quick adaptations after a triggering episode ([McComb et al., 2007](#)).

Typically, a management team that exhibits high flexibility tends to be able to manage various aspects of tasks under diverse circumstances. They are also highly motivated to acquire new knowledge and develop new skills that can help them manage the organization so that it is responsive to change ([Evans & Bahrami, 2020](#)). Furthermore, a highly flexible management team is likely to use an innovative approach when making decisions and implementing policy rather than rely on formalized rules and routinized procedures ([Sohi et al., 2020](#)). The literature has demonstrated that the management's flexibility is an essential characteristic that not only enables organizations to respond effectively to market uncertainty, but also helps them achieve high performance ([Evans & Bahrami, 2020](#); [Sohi et al., 2020](#)). For example, [Sohi et al. \(2020\)](#) showed that flexible project managers helped their teams cope with unforeseen circumstances and allowed them to make significant improvements in end-project performance. [Spac and Enache \(2020\)](#) contended that the flexibility of the management of educational units could influence educational institutions' performance significantly.

When applying the role of management team flexibility in sales organizations, it can be expected that salespeople who work under a management team that exhibits a high level of flexibility have a strong propensity to achieve better sales performance than those who work under a management team that lacks flexibility. Based on the classic leadership theory ([Yukl, 2010](#)), organizational leaders generally use their managerial skills and competencies to motivate and support their employees to achieve successful outcomes ([Charoensukmongkol, 2021](#); [Charoensukmongkol & Phungsoonthorn, 2022](#); [Charoensukmongkol & Puyod, 2021](#); [Islam et al., 2021](#); [Kuo et al., 2018](#)). [Zheng et al. \(2019\)](#) and [Maamari and Saheb \(2018\)](#) also found that leaders' task-based professional skills were among the crucial factors that enhanced employees' work performance. Because a highly flexible management team tends to be well-equipped with adaptive skills and a dynamic knowledge repository, both of which are essential to manage environmental changes ([Liu & Lin, 2019](#)), they can use this competence to help their salespeople develop skills and knowledge that are crucial for them to handle changes in sales situations effectively. A highly flexible management team also encourages

their salespeople to learn a broad repertoire of sales skills to enhance their ability to deal with any contingency and challenge in the market environment (Liu & Lin, 2019). In addition, they are likely to adopt organizational policies and management practices that encourage employees to be more adaptive to change (Sohi et al., 2020). All of these practices adopted by a management team with high flexibility can contribute to salespeople's ability to demonstrate good performance. The literature has also reported empirical evidence of the effect of the management team flexibility on employee performance. For example, Sabuhari et al. (2020) found that the flexibility of human resource management helped employees adapt to changes in their work effectively and enhanced their work performance. Particularly in the sales context, Micevski et al. (2019) reported that the management team flexibility enabled salespeople to achieve strong outcomes in sales and customer service. Given all of the evidence of the beneficial role of management team flexibility, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H2. Management team flexibility is associated positively with sales performance.

The management team flexibility is also proposed as the moderating condition that determines whether salespeople's functional flexibility can lead to higher sales performance. In particular, our research adopts the contingency approach to management as a framework to provide the rationale for this phenomenon (Fiedler, 1978). Broadly, the contingency approach implies that there is no single best way that leads to a successful outcome. When the contingency approach is applied to explain the effect of individual characteristics on work performance, it suggests that a single skill or capability that individuals possess and apply to their work may not necessarily lead to the outcome expected (Steinbach et al., 2017). Instead, the degree to which a certain skill or competency allows individuals to achieve high performance is contingent upon particular situational factors. Scholars have also applied the contingency approach in personal sales to show that the level of performance that salespeople achieved tended to depend upon the interaction between their characteristics and the nature of the sales environment (Charoensukmongkol & Pandey, 2020, 2021; Giacobbe et al., 2006). In particular, Weitz (1981) argued that personal sales is a complex process. Therefore, no specific capability of salespeople will allow them to achieve high performance if it does not fit well with the situation that requires or supports such a capability (Giacobbe et al., 2006; Zhou & Charoensukmongkol, 2021).

One key contingency factor in the workplace that determines strongly whether an employee's particular working style can lead to a successful outcome is the characteristics of the management team (Harris & Brown, 2021). In general, the management team plays a dominant role in creating work policies and practices that not only shape employees' work behaviors, but also influence their work outcomes (Charoensukmongkol, 2022b; Rehman et al., 2020; Yuki, 2010). To elaborate on why the similarity between the management team and the salespeople's flexibility can determine salespeople's performance, the person-environment fit theory is considered to clarify this phenomenon (Edwards, 2008; Edwards & Shipp, 2007). Fundamentally, the person-environment fit theory predicts that the degree of fit between employees and the work environment can affect their work outcomes (Edwards, 2008). The theory also suggests that employees' functioning tends to be facilitated when there is a fit between their characteristics and those of the work environment (Edwards & Shipp, 2007; Pattanawit & Charoensukmongkol, 2022). Given that the management team is among the key component of the work environment according to the person-environment fit theory (Marstand et al., 2017), the congruence between the working style of the

employees and the management team can determine the level of support that employees obtain from the management (Deschênes, 2021) and how well the employees can perform their task effectively to achieve the outcome desired (Safavi & Bouzari, 2020). In particular, when the employees' working style is consistent with that of the management team, it provides a supportive condition that helps employees work more effectively to achieve their goals (Byza et al., 2019). In contrast, when the employees' working style does not fit well with that of the management team, it may create obstacles that prevent the employees from performing their task effectively (Marstand et al., 2017).

Based upon the perspective of the contingency approach and the person-environment fit theory, management team flexibility is proposed as a contingency factor that may illustrate whether functional flexibility can help salespeople achieve higher sales performance. In particular, our research proposes that salespeople's functional flexibility can lead to better sales performance only when they work under a management team that exhibits a high level of flexibility as well. According to Liu and Lin (2019), the management team tends to be the key component in the organization that has a strong influence on the employees' willingness to demonstrate functional flexibility at work. Further, we argue that the management team flexibility also serves as a supporting condition that allows salespeople with functional flexibility to use this ability more effectively to achieve higher sales performance. Because a highly flexible management team tends to create a work environment and management policy that enhances flexibility in the workplace (Sohi et al., 2020), they are willing to provide their salespeople more support in terms of resources and latitude in making decisions, which strengthen salespeople's potential to apply their functional flexibility to improve their sales performance. This argument is supported by the study of Cañibano (2018) which suggested that a highly flexible management team is willing to give employees more control over the aspects of their job that increase performance. In the sales context, Micevski et al. (2019) also suggested that when the management adopts flexible management practices, it tends to provide salespeople with more freedom in the way they deploy resources to make adaptive responses to unexpected pressure.

Particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, the management team flexibility is indispensable, as it helps salespeople use their functional flexibility to achieve high sales performance. Given the novelty and high uncertainty in the market environment during the pandemic, simply possessing functional flexibility may not allow salespeople to manage the market disruption effectively. Salespeople need to obtain a considerable number of resources and support from the management to help them adapt successfully under the changing market conditions. When the management team exhibits high flexibility, they are willing to provide the resources necessary to increase their salespeople's likelihood of success through the flexible work practices that they undertake during the pandemic. For example, when salespeople with functional flexibility experience some difficulty when they undertake new work roles or sales tasks during the new normal, a flexible management team can provide useful guidance and support to help their employees cope effectively with the challenges attributable to the market disruption. Moreover, members of a flexible management team are likely to promote risk-taking in the organization, which encourages functionally flexible salespeople to experiment with various innovative approaches beyond the scope of their regular work responsibilities. This role a flexible management team plays is essential to increase the probability of success associated with the flexible work practices that the salespeople undertake. Therefore, in the scenario in which a highly flexible management team provides a supportive work environment and management

policy during the pandemic, we expect that highly functionally flexible salespeople will achieve greater sales performance.

On the other hand, we argue that when salespeople with high functional flexibility work under a management team that exhibits a low level of flexibility, the functional flexibility that the salespeople exhibit may not enhance their sales performance. Generally, a relatively inflexible management team tends to be more conservative and less adaptable to change (Carrasco et al., 2016). In a workplace that is operated by management with low flexibility, employees are required to follow formalized work procedures and perform predefined work roles strictly, and the work behaviors of employees who deviate from these formalized job procedures and requirements tend to be discouraged (Puyod & Charoensukmongkol, 2021). Moreover, employees refrain from taking the initiative to implement new procedures that would improve performance (Asgari et al., 2008). Basically, all of these rigid practices of a management team with low flexibility render the functional flexibility of salespeople unimportant and unsupported by the management. From the perspective of a management team with low flexibility, the high functional flexibility that their salespeople demonstrate may be perceived as a deviation from the work roles that they are expected to follow and may be regarded as unacceptable conduct.

Although salespeople who exhibit high functional flexibility can develop certain innovative approaches that may enable them to respond effectively to the changing market conditions during the COVID-19 pandemic, their chance to engage in these practices is likely to be reduced by a management team with little flexibility, who prefer their salespeople to maintain the traditional approach adopted before the pandemic. Moreover, salespeople with high functional flexibility may not receive support from a management team with low flexibility. Considering the highly uncertain market during the pandemic, lack of management support may limit functionally flexible salespeople's potential to achieve better performance through their flexible working practices. Lastly, the management team's low flexibility may make it difficult for them to provide useful guidance that allows functionally flexible salespeople to make effective adjustments to cope with the market disruption. In this scenario, the management team's low flexibility creates a constraining force that may nullify the benefits that salespeople gain when they demonstrate functional flexibility at work and may affect their sales performance adversely. Based upon this logic, we hypothesize that salespeople's functional flexibility can have positive effects on sales performance only when the management team exhibits high flexibility as well. This leads to the following hypothesis:

H3. Salespeople's high functional flexibility is associated positively with increased sales performance only when the management team flexibility is high.

3. Methods

3.1. Sample and data collection

We obtained a sample of salespeople who worked for sales organizations that registered with the Department of International Trade Promotion (DITP). DITP is the government institution that helps sales organizations in Thailand that engage in export gain access to customers in foreign countries. Before the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic, DITP set up trade shows in foreign countries regularly all year-round to which their member organizations sent their salespeople to acquire prospective customers abroad. However, the international travel restrictions imposed during the

pandemic shut down the international trade fairs, and thereby led all member organizations to engage less in foreign sales and emphasize domestic sales to a greater extent. Because these organizations' salespeople were highly specialized in international sales, but had less experience in domestic sales, the changes that they encountered were likely to make their sales activities more onerous, as they had to manage foreign and domestic sales simultaneously. Moreover, many organizations required their salespeople to learn how to use social media in their sales activities during the pandemic, which imposed a greater burden on those who were unfamiliar with this sales method. Overall, these changing circumstances that created new task responsibilities for these salespeople made them a suitable sample to study the role of functional flexibility that might allow them to manage these diverse tasks effectively during the pandemic.

During the time that our study was conducted, 120 sales organizations were listed as DITP members. The request for data collection was approved by the administrative office of the DITP that was in charge of the member relations. The DITP member organizations had approximately 2–5 salespeople who were responsible for international sales. We asked the DITP administrative office to share the link to the online survey with all member organizations and encourage their salespeople to participate in the survey, which obtained ethical approval from the Institutional Review Board of National Institute of Development Administration (Approval No. 2021/0003). Participation in the data collection was based only on the participants' consent, and their privacy was also protected strictly. The survey was distributed for two months from March to April 2021. Of the approximately 250 salespeople from all of the DITP member organizations, we received 227 surveys that contained useable data, which constituted a 91 percent response rate.

The summary of the participants' characteristics is reported in Table 1. The majority were female, and the average age was 33.1 years. With respect to sales experience, more than half of the participants had more than 2 years of experience in the international market, but had less than 2 years of experience in the domestic market. With respect to the international sales intensity before the COVID-19 pandemic, the proportion of international sales to total sales was approximately 39.8 percent, with a maximum of 100 percent and minimum of 5 percent. After the COVID-19 pandemic, the proportion of international sales dropped significantly to 24.3 percent, with a maximum of 80 percent and minimum of 0 percent.

3.2. Measures

We obtained the measure of *salespeople's functional flexibility* from van den Berg and van der Velde (2005) seven-item scale that was used originally in the restaurant business. To make the items valid for the sales context, the wording that referred to a restaurant was changed to an organization. The rating was based on a five-point Likert scale that ranged from 1: *strongly disagree* to 5: *strongly agree*. We obtained the measure of *management team flexibility* from Beltran-Martín et al. (2008) eight-item measure. The rating was based on the same five-point Likert scale that ranged from 1: *strongly disagree* to 5: *strongly agree*. We obtained the measure of *sales performance* from Pandey and Charoensukmongkol (2019) scale that was used previously to evaluate the performance of salespeople in Thai organizations. The evaluation encompassed 5 aspects of performance that the salespeople achieved over the past 12 months. The evaluation was made based upon a five-point Likert scale that ranged from 1: *Very low* to 5: *Very high*. The items that measured all latent variable were shown in Table 2.

Table 1
Characteristics of the respondents.

Variables	Descriptive Statistics
Age	Max: 55 Min: 20 Mean: 33.1 SD: 7.202
Gender	Female: 162 (71.4%) Male: 65 (28.6%)
Domestic sales experience	Less than 1 year: 132 (58.1%) 1 year: 55 (24.2%) 2 years: 22 (9.7%) 3 years: 7 (3.1%) 4 years: 4 (1.8%)
International sales experience	5 years or more: 7 (3.1%) Less than 1 year: 1 (0.4%) 1 year: 25 (11%) 2 years: 67 (29.5%) 3 years: 57 (25.1%) 4 years: 30 (13.2%)
Percentage of international sales to total sales before the COVID-19 pandemic	5 years or more: 47 (20.7%) Max: 100 percent Min: 5 percent Mean: 39.8 percent SD: 26.7 percent
Percentage of international sales to total sales after the COVID-19 pandemic	Max: 80 percent Min: 0 percent Mean: 24.3 percent SD: 17.8 percent

Table 2
Factor loadings of latent variable.

Variables and Items	Factor loadings
Salespeople's functional flexibility	
With my knowledge and experience, I would be able to change to another job within the organization without too many problems.	(.816)
With my knowledge and experience, I would be able to move to another function within my organization without too many problems.	(.803)
With my knowledge and experience, I would be able to change to another work role without too many problems.	(.847)
I am willing to change jobs within the overall organization.	(.830)
I am willing to combine my job with other jobs.	(.719)
I am willing to devote time and energy to education to develop myself for a future job.	(.760)
I am willing to work in different geographical locations.	(.706)
Sales performance	
Success in meeting sales target (<i>the item was removed due to low factor loading</i>)	N/A
Success in creating sales revenues	(.951)
Success in expanding network of customers	(.953)
Success in creating trust from customers	(.906)
Overall success in selling	(.950)
Management team flexibility	
Management team members in this organization can switch to more qualified jobs within a short time.	(.761)
Management team members in this organization have multiple skills that can be applied to tasks corresponding to other jobs	(.893)
Management team members in this organization learn new procedures and processes introduced in their jobs within a short period	(.821)
Management team members in this organization anticipate future skill requirements that may be needed to perform their jobs.	(.834)
When management team members in this organization are not able to perform a specific task, they quickly learn how to do it.	(.884)
When management team members detect problems in performing their jobs, they voluntarily try to identify the causes of these problems	(.838)
Most of the changes that have taken place in this organization were introduced by management team members	(.756)
Management team members in this organization act efficiently when a problem emerges, even in cases	(.895)

3.3. Control variables

Because certain personal characteristics and work-related factors could influence salespeople's performance, this study controlled for the effect of age, gender, sales experience in the domestic market, and international sales intensity during COVID-19. Age was coded as a continuous variable (in years); gender was coded as 0 (female) and 1 (male); sales experience in the domestic market was measured as a ranked variable (0 = less than 1 year, 1 = 1 year, 2 = 2 years, 3 = 3 years, 4 = 4 years, 5 = 5 years or more), and international sales intensity was coded by the percentage of international sales compared to total sales.

3.4. Data analysis

Partial Least Squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM), which is the component-based SEM, was chosen as the method of data analysis. Unlike the covariance-based SEM, which requires a large sample size and normally distributed data to produce less biased estimation, PLS-SEM is unaffected by the lack of these data characteristics (Hair et al., 2019). The appropriateness of using PLS-SEM was justified by the small sample size that we obtained ($n = 227$), as well as the variables' non-normal distribution that was confirmed by the Jarque-Bera test of normality. The PLS-SEM analysis was run in WarpPLS v. 7.0.

4. Findings

We began our analysis by assessing the validity and reliability of the latent variables. The convergent validity of the latent constructs was confirmed by the factor loadings. As shown in Table 2, they were above the 0.5 recommendation (Hair et al., 2009). Anyway, only the item “Success in meeting sales target” that measured sales performance was removed due to its low factor loading value. The latent constructs’ discriminant validity was also confirmed, as shown in Table 3, which indicated that the square root of the average variance extracted (AVE) of each latent variable was greater than its correlations with other variables (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). The reliability of all latent variables was also confirmed by the assessment of the composite reliability coefficient and Cronbach’s alpha coefficient, as shown in Table 3, all of which were greater than the 0.7 requirement (Nunnally, 1978). In addition, the possibility of a multicollinearity problem was ruled out by the values of the variance inflation factor (VIF) statistics that ranged from 1.02 to 1.91, below the 3.3 threshold (Petter et al., 2007).

Further, we tested the possibility of common method bias (CMB) that could occur in our cross-sectional data. We used Harman’s one-factor test, which has been performed normally in prior research, to ensure that our data demonstrated no CMB (Podsakoff et al., 2003). First, the result that we obtained from the analysis of the single-factor solution using exploratory factor analysis explained only 31 percent of the total variance. Podsakoff et al. (2003) indicated that a percentage less than 50 percent signified a low possibility of CMB. Second, the result from a confirmatory factor analysis, in which all items loaded on a single factor, provided poor fit indices of the one-factor model ($\chi^2/df = 1201.002$; SRMR = 0.093; CFI = 0.601; TLI = 0.591; RMSEA = 0.153). Overall, these analyses demonstrated that CMB was not a problem in our analysis.

Fig. 1 presents the results from the model estimation. For hypothesis 1, which predicted the positive association between salespeople’s functional flexibility and sales performance, we obtained a result that confirmed their significant positive association ($\beta = 0.183$; $p = .005$). Thus, hypothesis 1 was supported. Hypothesis

2 predicted that management team flexibility and sales performance were related positively. Our result confirmed their significant positive association ($\beta = 0.2$; $p = .009$), and supported hypothesis 2.

For hypothesis 3, which predicted that management team flexibility moderates the effect of salespeople’s functional flexibility on sales performance, we tested the moderating effect by assessing the beta coefficient of the interaction between salespeople’s functional flexibility and management team flexibility. The interaction had a positive sign ($\beta = 0.219$; $p < .001$), and was also statistically significant. This result signified that the positive effect of salespeople’s functional flexibility on sales performance was strengthened by management team flexibility. To obtain a clear picture of this moderating effect, regression lines that showed the effect of salespeople’s functional flexibility on sales performance were generated separately for the groups of salespeople with management teams with low and high levels of flexibility. WarpPLS generated the regression lines in the moderating effect analysis from the standardized values of the variables automatically. To classify management team flexibility as low and high, a standardized value above 0 was classified as high and one below 0 was classified as low. A comparison of the regression lines is shown in Fig. 2. The illustration showed that an increase in salespeople’s functional flexibility was associated with an increase in sales performance only when the management team’s level of flexibility was high. On the other hand, in the case of low management team flexibility, salespeople’s high functional flexibility had a slightly negative effect on sales performance.

To provide additional evidence to support hypothesis 3 and clarify whether the negative effect of salespeople’s high functional flexibility in the case of low management team flexibility was significant, we also split the dataset into two groups based upon high and low management team flexibility and then performed separate regression analyses. In the regression that was performed using the high management team flexibility dataset, the result still confirmed the significant positive association between salespeople’s functional flexibility and high sales performance ($\beta = 0.339$; $p < .001$). On the other hand, in the regression that was performed using the

Table 3
Variables correlations and square root of average variance extracted.

Variables	SFF	SP	MTF	INTS	XPD	AGE	GEN
SFF	(.785)	.238**	.428**	-.039	.254**	-.042	-.057
SP		(.940)	.273**	.382**	.08	-.194**	-.086
MTF			(.837)	-.118	.054	-.1	-.061
INTS				(1)	-.022	.009	.034
XPD					(1)	.466**	-.137
AGE						(1)	.043
GEN							(1)
Mean	3.972	3.368	3.864	.243	1.753	33.1	.29
SD	.631	1.409	.531	.178	1.183	7.202	.453
Skewness	-.055	.099	-1.212	1.913	1.277	.525	.945
Kurtosis	2.926	-.644	6.400	4.852	1.757	.048	-1.106
Jarque-Bera test of normality	NO	YES	NO	NO	NO	NO	NO
Composite Reliability coefficient	.918	.968	.949	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
Cronbach’s Alpha coefficient	.895	.956	.938	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a

- Notes.
- SFF = salespeople’s functional flexibility, SP = sales performance, MTF = management team flexibility, INTS = international sales intensity, XPD = domestic sales experience, AGE = age, GEN = gender.
 - ***p < .01; *p < .05.
 - Values in parentheses are square roots of AVEs.
 - For the Jarque-Bera test of normality, NO indicates that the normal distribution of the variable is not supported and YES indicates that the normal distribution is supported.

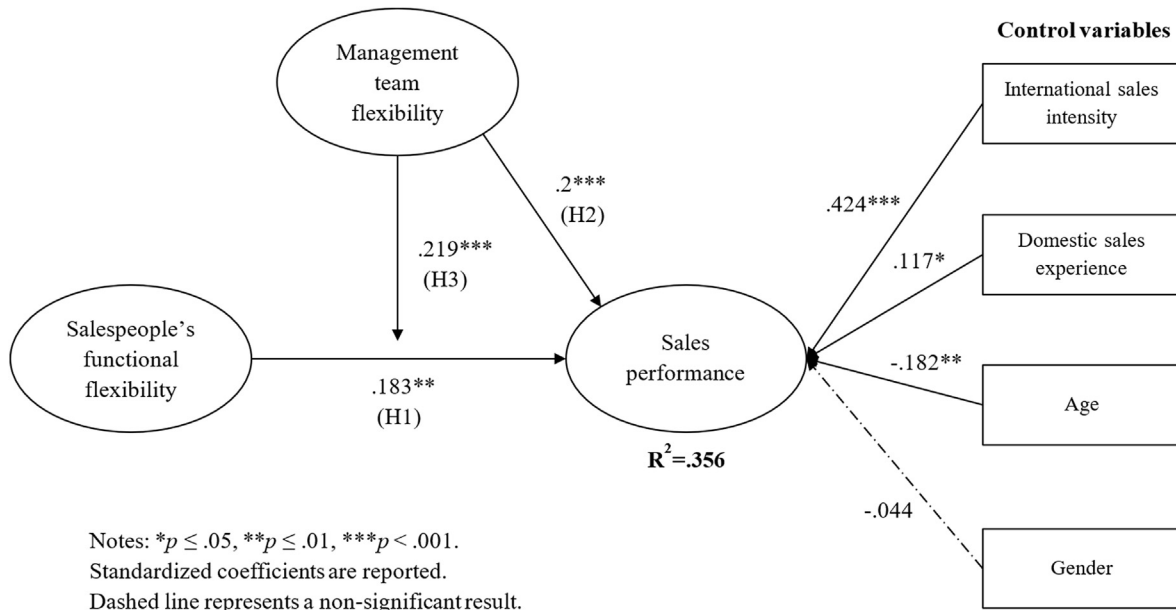


Fig. 1. Results of hypotheses tests.

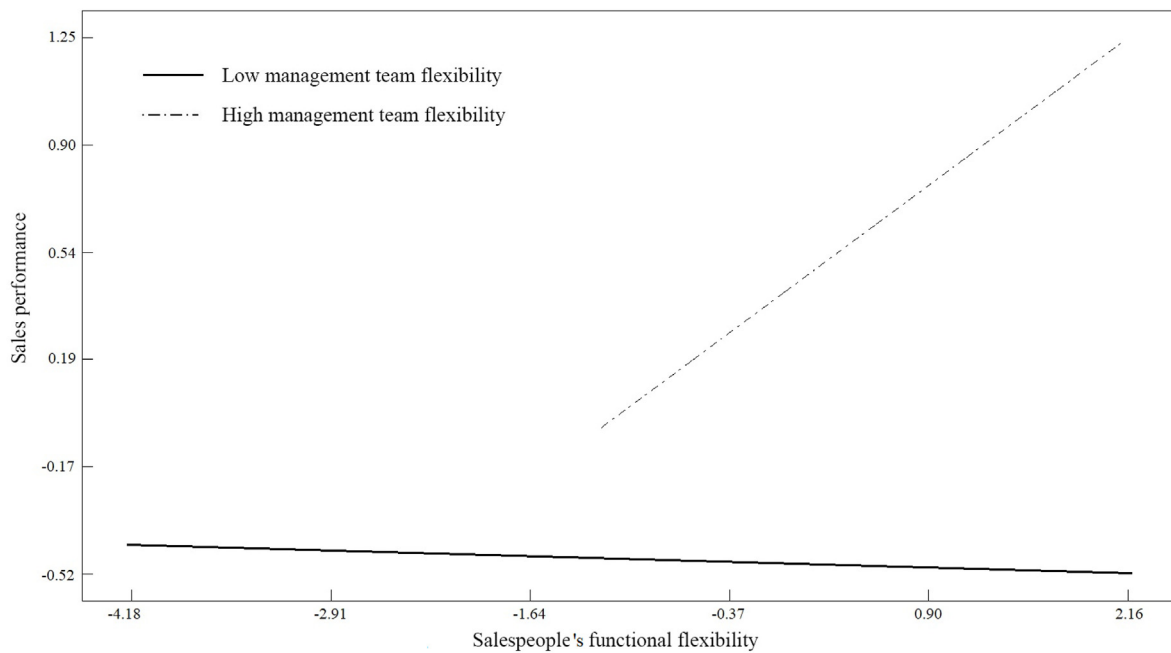


Fig. 2. Interaction effect of salespeople's functional flexibility and management team flexibility.

low management team flexibility dataset, the result showed that the association between salespeople's functional flexibility and sales performance was negative, but not significant ($\beta = -.041$; $p = .741$). Overall, these results provided clear support for hypothesis 3, which suggested that the positive association between salespeople's high functional flexibility and increased sales performance will be exhibited only when the management team flexibility is high.

Lastly, with respect to the control variables' effects, the model estimation showed that international sales intensity ($\beta = 0.424$; $p < .001$), domestic sales experience ($\beta = 0.117$; $p = .05$), and salespeople's age ($\beta = -0.182$; $p = .004$) were associated

significantly with increased sales performance, while their gender ($\beta = -0.044$; $p = .23$) did not demonstrate a significant association. Given the role of international sales intensity, which was associated positively with high sales performance, this result implied that salespeople who still engaged more in international sales during the pandemic tended to have higher sales performance. Given that our sample of salespeople was specialized in international more than domestic sales, it was reasonable that salespeople who still engaged in more international sales during the pandemic would have a greater likelihood of maintaining better sales performance than those who had to shift extensively to unfamiliar domestic sales. However, previous domestic sales experience was associated

positively with sales performance, which implied that domestic sales experience tended to be crucial for salespeople to make effective adjustments and perform well when they had to switch from international to domestic sales during the pandemic. With respect to the effect of age, which was associated negatively with sales performance, the result implied that older salespeople tended to achieve lower sales performance than younger salespeople during the pandemic. A plausible explanation for this could be the nature of older people, who may have a lower potential to learn new skills and accept new challenges by comparison to younger people (van Dalen et al., 2009). This characteristic of older salespeople could limit their ability to cope with the market disruption and perform well in sales during the pandemic.

5. Discussion and conclusion

5.1. Summary of results

This research examined the effect of salespeople's functional flexibility on sales performance during the COVID-19 pandemic. The study also investigated whether management team flexibility influenced the performance that salespeople achieved, as well as whether it moderated the effect of salespeople's functional flexibility on sales performance. Our model estimation provided supporting evidence that showed that salespeople who possessed a high level of functional flexibility tended to show a significantly higher level of sales performance. With respect to the role of management team flexibility, the model estimation also showed that it affected sales performance positively and significantly. Moreover, management team flexibility was found to moderate the effect of salespeople's functional flexibility on sales performance. In particular, the result showed clearly that there was a positive association between salespeople's functional flexibility and strong sales performance only among salespeople who worked with a management team that exhibited a high level of flexibility. On the other hand, with respect to the group of salespeople who worked with a management team that exhibited a low level of flexibility, the salespeople's functional flexibility appeared to have a slight negative effect on the sales performance they achieved.

5.2. Theoretical contribution

Our findings offered new evidence to expand the body of knowledge about the beneficial role of employees' functional flexibility. By using the case of salespeople who faced changes in their sales tasks and environment during the pandemic, our results also supported the literature that has emphasized the role that functional flexibility plays in helping employees manage change and uncertainty effectively (Evans & Bahrami, 2020; Liu & Lin, 2019). In particular, our results provided additional evidence to strengthen the findings from previous studies that confirmed the positive effect of employees' functional flexibility on performance outcomes in other occupational and situational contexts (Au et al., 2019; Avgoustaki, 2017; Liu & Lin, 2019; van den Berg & van der Velde, 2005; Waheed et al., 2021).

More importantly, the unique contribution of our research was the finding of the boundary condition with respect to the management team flexibility that affected whether or not salespeople's functional flexibility could enhance their sales performance significantly. By adopting the contingency approach as the framework to explain the moderating role of management team flexibility (Fiedler, 1978), our research clarified that salespeople's functional flexibility led to enhanced sales performance only when the management team exhibited a high level of flexibility. We showed that the congruence between the salespeople's flexibility

and that of the management team tended to be a supporting condition that provided the opportunity for highly functionally flexible salespeople to use this ability to achieve strong performance. On the other hand, lack of flexibility on the part of the management team appeared to exert a constraining force that did not provide the opportunity for salespeople with high functional flexibility to use their flexible working practices to enhance performance. Specifically, we showed that the mismatch in flexibility could have a negative influence on the performance that the salespeople achieved. When the work practices of the salespeople with functional flexibility contrasted with those of the management team that did not foster flexible working practices in the organization, salespeople suffered from the management team's lack of support, which created an obstacle that prevented them from achieving good performance through the flexible working practices that they undertook during the market disruption. In particular, this result corresponds to the prediction of the person-environment fit theory that suggests that the interaction between the employees' characteristics and those of the work environment can potentially influence employees' performance outcomes (Edwards & Shipp, 2007; Marstand et al., 2017; Safavi & Bouzari, 2020). In essence, our study supported the assertion that the employees' characteristics must be consistent with those of the management to provide a condition that helps employees use their skills to achieve successful outcomes.

5.3. Limitations and recommendations for future studies

Our study included some limitations that arose from our research design, which was based upon cross-sectional data collection. When cross-sectional data are used, the causality between the variables cannot be verified; therefore, our results should only be interpreted in terms of association rather than causation. To confirm a causal relation, future experimental research is needed to test whether flexibility training can enhance performance. Moreover, the results obtained with a sample of salespeople from a small number of sales organizations in a single country are unlikely to be applicable to the entire population of salespeople. We still require more research to replicate our study with different types of samples to strengthen the ability to generalize and apply our results. In addition, collecting data with a self-report questionnaire survey can generate some subjective bias in the measures. Lastly, the control variables we used were limited to just a few factors, and some key determinants of sales performance were omitted in the analysis.

Future studies are still required to expand our understanding about the way functional flexibility improves employees' performance outcomes. Given that the current knowledge about the moderating conditions that influence the effectiveness of employees' flexibility was limited to a few factors, future research will need to explore what other boundary conditions could influence the effect of functional flexibility on employee outcomes. For example, future studies will need to consider certain employee characteristics and organizational and situational factors that could cause the effect of functional flexibility to vary across individuals.

5.4. Practical implications for change management

This study also offers recommendations for change management policy during times of market turbulence as during the COVID-19 pandemic. Given the unforeseen changes that occur frequently and unexpectedly in the market environment (Vaitoonkiat & Charoensukmongkol, 2020), it is crucial to consider ways that functional flexibility could be developed as a change management practice that must be promoted among employees

and the management to enhance their potential to make effective adjustments to changes and maintain satisfactory performance during this unfavorable period. Firstly, this research suggests that a management policy that promotes employees' functional flexibility is necessary to prepare them to respond to any unexpected situations that occur in their work. Job enrichment and job rotation are popular management practices used to promote employees' functional flexibility that should be adopted to enhance their adaptability as they engage in different types of work (Alias et al., 2018). For example, the management will need to encourage and assign their employees to work on a variety of tasks that are beyond their work routine. In the context of sales organizations, the management may provide training and then assign their salespeople to serve different groups of customers or manage the sales of products that are not their specialty. Nevertheless, we suggest that the development of functional flexibility among employees may not help them benefit from this ability adequately if they are not supported by the management team. Therefore, this research suggests further that the flexibility of the management team must be developed as well to support employees fully to manage the changes effectively. In particular, the management team must be flexible from the beginning to provide a supportive condition that helps employees use this skill to achieve good performance. In summary, we recommend that the development of employees' and management teams' functional flexibility are change management practices that must be implemented in tandem to ensure that employees are prepared well to cope successfully with the changes and challenges they encounter during uncertain times.

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