

# Keller Center Research Report

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# The Power of Autonomy in Complex Sales Negotiations

*Christine Lai-Bennejean, PhD and Aaron D. Arndt, PhD*

Agreements between buyers and sellers often involve negotiations, where both sides work to align their resources and actions.<sup>1</sup> For example, Walmart conducts negotiations with 80% of its vendors and has tested an artificial intelligence program to handle discussions with the rest.<sup>2</sup> While some negotiations center on a single issue, typically price, other negotiations encompass multiple topics. Therefore, considering the importance of multi-issue negotiations, it is necessary for salespeople to understand how to best prepare to close these deals. This introduces the



question of how salespeople can effectively prepare for multi-issue negotiations.

Some salespeople handle the pressure of challenging negotiations by procrastinating or withdrawing; however, negotiator autonomy could also be an important factor. While the effects of autonomy might seem to potentially boost effort through enhanced motivation, it is also possible

that the complexity of negotiations might overwhelm salespeople, causing them to default to concessions instead of crafting a clear, strategic approach. This article explores how autonomy impacts strategies to empower salespeople in complex, high-stakes negotiations.

## Negotiation Autonomy (Engagement and Issue Autonomy)

Autonomy is described as the degree to which salespeople are given discretion in negotiating with buyers.<sup>3</sup> In sales research, the appropriate level of autonomy granted to salespeople is a recurrent managerial concern. We studied two forms of negotiation autonomy, i.e., engagement and issue autonomy. Engagement autonomy pertains to the authority to initiate, disengage, and conclude negotiations without needing additional permission from management. Salespeople with high engagement autonomy do not require any permissions from their own firms to enter or exit negotiations, while those with less engagement autonomy require an increasing number of permissions and have less control over when to negotiate. Negotiation issue autonomy refers to the permission to be flexible on specific issues within predefined parameters (e.g. price, delivery date). Issue autonomy influences product quantities, determines revenue, and has a direct effect on the selling firm's profitability.<sup>4</sup>

## Our Study

One issue our research addresses is the question of whether salespeople should be granted autonomy in multi-issue negotiations. We also examine key questions of how autonomy

influences salespeople’s anticipated preparation effort in both single-issue and multi-issue negotiations. Specifically, we research how different forms of autonomy interact to impact both salespeople’s anticipated preparation effort and the setting of initial positions, i.e., the first set of terms proposed at the outset of the negotiation. We do this by conducting three scenario-based experimental studies with 139, 103, and 132 salespeople/service professionals, respectively.

We find that salespeople do not anticipate investing more preparation effort for multi-issue negotiations than single-issue negotiations when their engagement autonomy is low—it is only when they are granted high engagement autonomy that they anticipate investing more effort into multi-issue negotiations. This study shows that anticipated preparation effort depends on the interaction between number of negotiating issues and engagement autonomy.

We also examine whether issue complexity and general negotiation autonomy will interact significantly. We find that anticipated preparation effort is the highest when multi-issue negotiations are combined with high engagement autonomy. Salespeople do engage in more preparation when both engagement autonomy and issue autonomy are low, but they tend to set more customer-favorable positions under these conditions, representing a discount at the outset of the negotiation.

## Real Estate Implications

Real estate managers should consider the importance of engagement autonomy on their sales agents’ motivation to pursue the firm’s interests. Involving salespeople in the decision to engage in negotiations rather than ordering them signals trust, empowers them to shoulder responsibilities, and fosters their personal development. Experienced negotiators understand that starting with a strong position gives them more leverage to make trade-offs later. If salespeople begin with an offer that is too favorable to the customer, they leave themselves little room to negotiate and may end up making concessions without getting anything in return. Salespeople should take a strategic approach, deciding in advance which issues they are willing to compromise on and what they expect in exchange. For this reason, giving salespeople initial generalized autonomy is likely to yield the best outcomes for their organization and/or the buyers and sellers they represent.

## Recommended Reading

Lai-Bennejean, Christine and Aaron D. Arndt (2025), “Empowering Salespeople in Complex Negotiations: Autonomy and Leeway in Preparation and Concession-Making,” *Journal of Business Research*, 190, 115233. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2025.115233>

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## About the Authors

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Dr. Christine Lai-Bennejean’s (PhD – ESSEC Business School) research interests focus on organizational frontline management, seller-buyer negotiation, team selling and key account management and sales & marketing education. Her works have been published in *Journal of International Marketing*, *Journal of Business Research*, *Industrial Marketing Management*, *Journal of Personal Selling & Sales Management*, among others. She currently serves as Associate Editor for the Sales track at the *Journal of Marketing Education*.

### **Aaron D. Arndt, PhD**

#### **Professor, Old Dominion University**

Dr. Aaron Arndt (PhD – University of Oklahoma) has been at Old Dominion University since August 2008 and led the ODU sales program from 2019 to 2025 as the inaugural Chair of the Thurmond School of Professional Sales and Negotiations. His primary research interests are in personal selling, sales management, negotiations, and retailing. He has published 39 research articles to date in journals such as the *Journal of Retailing*, *Journal of Personal Selling and Sales Management*, and the *International Journal of Research in Marketing*. He has won multiple awards for his research and teaching, including the James M. Comer Award for Best Contribution to Selling and Sales Management Theory 2021. His research has been featured in the *Virginian Pilot* and National Public Radio.

Dr. Arndt teaches a variety of classes at the undergraduate and graduate level including professional selling, sales management, negotiation, marketing management, persuasion, and marketing research. He incorporates hands-on practice and community engagement projects into his classes so that students have the opportunity to develop skills and gain real-world experience. As part of his work in the Thurmond School, he has hosted dozens of outreach seminars to help people in the local community improve their negotiation and communication skills. He is also the Executive Director of the National Conference in Sales Management and the ODU faculty advisor for ODU chapter of Pi Sigma Epsilon.



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