

## Strategic Compliance: A study of Professionals' Responses to Sales Management Control

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### Abstract

This study responds to the call for research on how different and often conflicting discourses co-exist in professionals' everyday work experiences. The paper explores how professionals respond to sales management in the context of two professional service firms (PSFs). Based on a qualitative study of employees' experiences of sales, our findings suggest that the professionals respond to sales management by engaging in *strategic compliance*, i.e., adhering to rules and expectations to achieve goals of professional advancement (financial, status, autonomy), which, in turn, reinforces their membership of the profession. We identified three modes of strategic compliance: career-, integration-, and survival-mode. This conceptual framework contributes with a deepened understanding of the complex relationship between professional work and sales management. Specifically, our study suggests that while strategic compliance may help professionals navigate the tensions between professional- and sales-ideals, it is also associated with struggle and normalizes sales as a part of professional work.

### Keywords

Professional service firms, sales, professional work, control, strategic compliance

Since the 1980s, the professions of law and accounting have experienced changes in institutional pressure from both the state and the market. Globalization, technical developments, and a significant shift toward a market orientation have impacted not only the landscape in which accountants and lawyers conduct their practice but also the professionals' everyday work and their sense of professional responsibility and focus (Brint, 1994; Cooper & Robson, 2006; Hanlon, 1997, 1999; Lander et al., 2012). In the wake of deregulative changes, the control of professionals has moved toward market-based controls. Traditionally, a key characteristic of the professions is their independence from the state and the market (Freidson, 2001), but as the market of the professional service firms (PSFs) has become increasingly competitive and open, there is an increasing tension between professionalism and "the increasing emphasis on commercialism and corporatism" (Cohen, 2015, p. 353).

One consequence of this is that sales and promotion enter the professionals' work, forcing professionals in PSFs to navigate a highly commercialized context with sales management efforts, including explicit sales goals, participation in sales courses, and increased focus on client relationships (Empson, Muzio, Broschak, Hinings, 2015). This development is not limited to firms and the business context. In the wake of the New Public Management, scholars have noted an increased focus on target setting and outputs in public service professions (e.g., Noordegraaf, 2015; Taylor & Kelly, 2006). Some have specifically observed a sales focus (see e.g., Ulfsdotter Eriksson et al., 2017), which points to a more general development toward a situation where clients or patients become customers and the professionals' work becomes more controlled by the organization employing them, and less by their profession (Evetts, 2011).

Despite indications that the practice and discourse of sales play a significant part in contemporary work in PSFs—and that, as firms, PSFs are more explicitly exposed to market mechanisms—there is a paucity of research on how professionals within PSFs experience and respond to sales management control. There are a few studies emphasizing that commercialization and sales permeate various aspects of professional work, and they indicate that resistance is common at the intersection between commercialization/sales and professionalism (Sommerlad, 2011; Darr, 2002; 2006; Lander et al., 2012). However, this research is still limited and mainly conceptualizes reactions to commercialism in terms of resistance and does not focus on how the professionals experience sales management control and struggle to *combine* pressure to sell with ideals of professionalism, which is the focus of this paper.

Through this focus, we respond to calls for research on how different and often conflicting discourses co-exist in professionals' everyday work experiences (Alvehus, 2018). More specifically, we address requests for studies examining what commercialization means for professionals and their work (Cooper & Robson, 2006), and the meaning of sales in work roles that are not normally associated with sales (Darr, 2006; Geiger & Kelly, 2014). This is

important because there are indications that commercialization produces tensions in professionals' work life (e.g., Cohen, 2015). In light of this, the purpose of this paper is to increase the understanding of the relationship between professional work and sales management. To do so, we draw on a qualitative study with empirical data from 28 professionals and pose the research question: *How do professionals respond to sales management in the context of professional service firms?* The professionals in our study are lawyers and accountants working at two different PSFs based in Sweden, where the initiation and use of sales management control are part of their everyday work.

Our study found that the professionals engage in what we call *strategic compliance* as a response to the sales management control. We identified three modes of strategic compliance: *career*, *integration*, and *survival*—which we will outline further below. Empirically, our analysis provides insight into what it means to be a member of a profession by showing how professionals navigate the conditions of contemporary professional work, where traditional ideals of the profession struggle with ideals of the market, sales and promotion. Conceptually, this paper contributes to the literature on professionals and control by introducing the concept of strategic compliance to understand how professionals navigate the sales discourse in their responses to sales management control attempts.

## **Professional work, control and sales**

The traditional view of the professions suggests that professionals, to a larger extent than other occupations, are in control of their own work (Abbott, 1988; Freidson, 2001). This implies that professionals develop and control work aspects, such as terms, conditions, content, and goals of their specific profession (Brante, 1988; Empson & Chapman, 2015; Freidson, 2001; Rennstam, 2007). For example, they determine the qualifications required to perform particular tasks and control the “criteria for licensing or credentialing procedures that are enforced by the state” (Freidson, 2001, p. 56).

This does not mean that professionals are not exposed to control, however. While studies have noted that traditional management control methods such as bureaucracy and direct control fit badly with the complexity of professional work (e.g., Abbott, 1988; Covaleski et al., 1998; Empson et al., 2015; Freidson, 2001), studies have shown how various types and combinations of control develop internally in PSFs. For instance, in a study of accounting firms, Covaleski et al. (1998) found that the professionals were controlled by a combination of management by objectives and mentoring, which aligned the professionals' identities, goals, and actions with the goals of the firm. Control in PSFs can also be more subtle. In a study of engineering and communications consultants, Robertson, and Swan (2003) observed how the organization combined a culture that acknowledged ambiguity and flexibility in terms of work roles and power relations with a culture of elitism. This appealed to the consultants because it instilled a sense of autonomy (being able to step into various roles), but it also disciplined them by producing commitment to organizational goals. A

similar example is found in Alvesson and Kärreman's (2007, p. 702) study of a management consultancy firm, where they found that the firm's intricate HRM-system produced what the authors call "aspirational control." By connecting the individual consultant to particular ideas of career and rewards, aspirational control works to align employee identity and compliance with the firm's goal of producing committed and hard-working employees. These studies share the insight that, when formalized controls such as bureaucracy constrain the flexibility required to perform professional work, normative forms of control tend to develop instead. However, they do not address the role of sales as a source of control, and how professionals experience, deal with, and respond to these control efforts.

The notion of sales brings attention to the traditional ideal that a defining characteristic of the professions is their independence from the market and the state (Freidson, 2001). However, research also highlights that there is reason to nuance this ideal of freedom from state and market control (Brante, 1988; Cooper & Robson, 2006; Hanlon, 1997, 1999; Robson et al., 1994). Since the 1980s, there have been increasing pressures on the professions, from both the state and the market. Amidst deregulation, globalization, increased competition, and requirements of growth and profit from within professional organizations, such as PSFs, professionals' responsibilities, and focus have changed (Cooper & Robson, 2006). On the one hand, professions should be independent from the state, but, on the other hand, they need the state to remain independent from the market (Freidson, 2001). When the state imposes deregulation, the dependence on the market increases, resulting in a growing mistrust in professionals who display too strong economic interests. Thus, professions need to navigate a fine balance between the state and the market.

Currently, this balance is leaning toward the market and managerialism. Studies point at increasingly competitive markets and a managerial focus on corporate and commercial values, which affect the goals, actions, and career developments of professionals (Cohen, 2015) and shifts "the control over professionals from the professionals to market competition and hierarchical control through management in organizations" (Lander et al., 2012, p. 133). Contemporary professional work is sometimes understood as "hybrid," having to deal with both professional and managerial principles (Noordegraaf, 2015), or, similarly, but with more focus on tension, it is stressed that there is, on the one hand, an occupational professionalism, guided by professional logic, and on the other hand, an organizational one, guided by corporate and market logic (Evetts, 2011).

Thus, while research has noted that market orientation increasingly constrains the autonomy of PSFs, studies specifically on sales management efforts in PSFs and how professionals navigate this are still limited. As noted, exceptions are Sommerlad (2011), Lander et al. (2012), and Darr's (2000, 2002, 2006) studies. Sommerlad (2011) highlights how commercialization influences recruitment practices in law firms. Her findings suggest that contemporary HRM practices focus on and value "legal entrepreneurs" (p. 73), that is, "the only characteristic of importance being the ability to generate business and meet

targets" (p. 95). However, Sommerlad's study does not analyze how the professionals experience and respond to these HRM practices. Similar to Sommerlad, Darr, in a study of engineers, highlights that sales-related control links the engineers' success to their social skills and their ability to account for the profitability of their projects (Darr, 2000). Nonetheless, Darr also focuses on the professionals' responses to sales management control. He found that the engineers resisted sales management efforts to increase documentation around sales, by only engaging in superficial documentation and arguing that management provided neither time nor resources for the documentation (Darr, 2002). In Lander et al.'s (2012) study, an accounting firm moved from a trustee logic to a commercial logic, which affected the role of the accountants as strategic decisions were increasingly based on commercial concerns, a change that the accountants sought to resist.

These studies show how commercialization and sales affect recruitment practices, documentation, and the value of social and communicative skills. They indicate that resistance among professionals is common at the intersection between commercialization/sales and professionalism. Thus, our study builds on these previous insights, but it explores in more depth how sales management control is experienced by professionals and how they struggle to combine it with ideals of professionalism.

## Method

This study is rooted in the qualitative interpretivist research tradition, informed by a concern to understand the world based on the point of view of the people who live in it (Prasad, 2015). Grounded in this approach, we strive to understand and conceptualize meanings and interpretations (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2009; Charmaz, 2006) that the professionals, in the context of PSFs, hold about navigating sales management.

The empirical material used in this study is based on qualitative interviews gathered during a 3-month period spent at Blue Law and Blue Accounting. The interviews were conducted as part of a larger research project on sales in professional work that also consists of observations and document studies. The participants in this study comprise 28 full-time professionals—14 accountants and 14 lawyers, whereof 15 are women and 13 men—who had worked within their respective professions for between 6 months and 39 years. Professionals from all levels of the organization were interviewed, representing a mix of junior, mid-, and top-level professionals.

Access to this group of respondents was attained as the first author, in her role as a researcher with an interest in sales, was invited to join a business network consisting of professionals from various industries. Here, she met representatives from the two PSFs. Two main criteria guided the choice of PSFs: (1) the organization must employ professionals from law and/or accounting, as these two professions are well established in the literature (see, e.g., Abbott, 1988; Freidson, 2001), and (2) the professionals must engage in sales as part of their everyday work (because our study had set out to investigate sales). The respondents

were selected in cooperation with the office managers based on availability. We aimed to select a variety of professionals—differing in terms of gender, age, and position—to increase the likelihood that we would get a broad set of voices about the organizations.

The interviews were held one-on-one in a meeting room at the respondents' workplace. The interviews varied in length, from 21 to 82 minutes. The first author followed a semi-structured interview approach based on an interview guide with open-ended questions in order to focus the conversation while also giving the respondents the opportunity to talk freely and address areas that they felt were of relevance. The interview guide consisted of four sections, containing both general and more specific questions on the professionals' everyday work, a typical day, their road to becoming a professional, and their experiences with sales. In total, the data material consists of interview transcripts and field notes.

In order to meet the ethical requirements for this study, we collected informed consent from all professionals in terms of participation, being interviewed, and recorded. All data material were anonymized, which means names, departments, etc. were replaced by codes; finally, all recordings were saved on an external hard disk with coded access.

### ***Analysis of empirical material***

The analytical part of this study is inspired by grounded theory as developed by Charmaz (2006). This means that we do not subscribe to the notion of approaching our field of study as a blank canvas or being non-theoretical (e.g., Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Rather, the analysis emerged in an iterative process and dialogue between the empirical material and the authors' theoretical familiarity (e.g., Charmaz, 2006). Based on previous literature, it is, for example, known that professionals experience tensions related to the intersection between conflicting logics (Alvehus, 2018), such as between professional work and commercial market aspects (Darr, 2000, 2002, 2006)—and we worked with this knowledge as sensitizing concepts guiding the analysis (Blumer, 1969).

Reading the interviews, we saw that sales in PSFs are associated with control and compliance, and that the interviews provided insight into how the professionals responded to that control. From that broad theme, the first author started doing the initial categorization. The analysis showed that they engaged in sales activities, thought about sales on a daily basis, and that, to some extent, they felt forced to do so. It also indicated that the professionals responded to the request or expectation to sell in a strategic manner, by turning it into an element in their career advancement efforts. As such, the professionals' responses indicated an element of coping (Ulfsdotter Eriksson et al., 2017). However, coping did not quite capture what we saw in our data. We also observed a strategic element in their responses, which relates to but goes beyond the notion of coping. The analysis of how they talked showed that, when speaking about sales and describing their response to sales management, the professionals used words both to express rather negative feelings, such as

“force” and “demand” and also rather agentic words such as “strategy” and “generate.” This indicated to us that sales were both something problematic and something useful to them.

Grounded in these insights, we were able to identify themes that indicated variations in the ways that the professionals responded to sales pressure (Charmaz, 2006; Ryan & Bernard, 2003). We found three modes of being strategically compliant: career-, expert-, and survival-mode.

In the presentation of our data, we use both shorter examples and relatively long narratives. Upon analyzing our data, it became evident that we had several uninterrupted interview statements in which the professionals seemed to open up and speak relatively freely about their life as accountants and lawyers, telling their story about the experience of sales rather than simply answering a number of pre-set questions (Charmaz, 2006; Czarniawska, 1998). We wanted to capture this, striving to provide rich data that demonstrate some detail and complexity (Czarniawska, 1998), allowing for exploration of descriptions and word use (Riessmann, 2008).

We did not conduct a comparative analysis of the two PSFs because of the patterns of similarities between them, primarily in terms of sales management efforts (see below in the following section) and the ways in which the professionals responded to them. In the early phase of this study, we expected to see more differences. However, we found that despite the different contexts, the sales management efforts and how the professionals responded to them followed similar patterns.

## **Sales management control at Blue Law and Blue Accounting**

Within Blue Law (BL) and Blue Accounting (BA), there are signs of sales management control mechanisms, and both firms have structures in place that constitute sales as a central part of the professionals' work. Financial reward systems are one aspect of this, which means that the lawyers and accountants at the two PSFs are rewarded when they bring in new clients and business to their respective firms. Moreover, the professionals have reoccurring 1:1-meetings with peers where sales and client activities are discussed, and goals are set. Sales courses, information meetings, mentoring, network, and event participation are also part of the sales management setup at both PSFs and the career paths are directly linked to sales. Thus, in order to move to the next level of the organization and eventually become partner, an employee needs to build a client base large enough that the firm considers him or her as central for the firm.

The two PSFs, one a Swedish law firm and the other a local office of a global accounting firm in Southern Sweden, both operate in the same market and under Swedish law. The professionals at both firms are trained lawyers and accountants and are subject to the rules of conduct set up by the Swedish Bar Association and the Institute for the Accountancy Profession in Sweden, respectively. This includes rules of conduct for promotion and sales.

The PSFs offer a wide range of accounting and law services. The lawyers sell services in areas such as labour law, dispute settlement, contract-, property-, tax-law, public procurement, and company- and construction law to public and private organizations in Southern Sweden, and their client base includes small, medium-sized, and large organizations. The accountants sell services in areas of audit, assurance, financial accounting, and advisory and tax to organizations of all sizes—from entrepreneurs to international organizations. In both firms, the junior professionals are expected to work extensively with sales after around 3 years of employment.

### ***Tensions around sales***

Although normalized, we found that the professionals associated the practice of sales with tension and discomfort. On the one hand, the professionals accept sales in the sense of not suggesting that they should stop doing it. On the other hand, the professionals express that the sales role is “difficult,” “silly,” “hard,” “not my role,” and “uncomfortable.” For example, Bella, a lawyer, captures the discomfort surrounding sales in her account:

*I prefer sitting in my office writing. I like it much more than selling. I enjoy it more. But I do like client contact and negotiations. I think that is really fun, but sales as such, I find tough, but communication around the law and the case, I enjoy that.*

This example shows how Bella struggles with the sales-part of her work. She separates sales from her professional work, stating that she likes client contact, but only as long as the communication revolves around the law or the actual case in question. When sales become a part of the contact and communication with the client, the situation changes for Bella and becomes something she finds “tough.” Sales is, on the one hand, integrated into the client relationship and therefore part of the professional relationship, but, on the other hand, it is the “tough” part.

This tension around sales was evident in almost all interviews. Generally, talking about sales and the management control of sales invoked emotional reactions among the lawyers and accountants, and they did not hesitate to express their discomfort in that regard:

*I find it hard to promote myself and sell. There are so many others that do the same as us (...) We are not trained in sales; in law school, this is not something we talk about at all; so, it is hard. (Christopher, lawyer)*

*I've never been comfortable with selling. (Eva, accountant)*

*I think it's rather hard. It's easier if someone hears about me and contacts me. (Johan, accountant)*

Discomfort and tension between professional work and sales work permeate through these quotes. On the one hand, the interviewees are communicating that selling is a necessary part of the profession: “There are so many others that do the same as us” indicates the assumption that only waiting for clients to call does not work, which brings selling into the



profession. On the other hand, the statements above about the absence of selling in their professional education indicate that sales are not part of their professional knowledge, such as when Christopher says, "in law school, this is not something we talk about." In other words, their point seems to be that selling is part of the job, but it is not really part of their professional training and largely an unwelcome part of their daily work.

### ***Three modes of strategic compliance***

In light of the tension displayed above, the empirical material also shows that their struggle takes a certain shape as they navigate and try to find ways to approach and deal with the tension they experience. They are responding to the sales control through what we call *strategic compliance*, that is, they adhere to sales management control in order to achieve goals of professional advancement, which, in turn, reinforces their membership in the profession. The focus on long-term professional advancement and reinforcement of professional membership signifies the strategic aspect of the term, while the focus on adherence to rules, despite expressions of disapproval, signifies the compliance aspect.

The expressions of strategic compliance varied enough to merit separation into three modes, which we call the *career mode*, *integration mode*, and *survival mode*.

Table 1. *Three modes of strategic compliance*

<b>Mode</b>	<b>Key strategy</b>	<b>Example of how sales is constructed</b>
Career	Offensive	as a tool for career advancement
Integration	Integrative	as part of doing good professional work
Survival	Defensive	as an obstacle to well-being and ability to do professional work

All three modes imply that the professionals comply with the sales management control, but the way in which they do this, and the consequences for their work, differ. The career mode is characterized by individual instrumentality, a focus on turning sales to one's own advantage. The integration mode is characterized by translation of the market aspect and sales into the core of the professional work of providing help, service, and trust to clients—a way to blend the ideals and make it productive for themselves (Noordegraaf, 2015). The survival mode is most strongly characterized by the struggle to navigate sales as a part of their daily work. In this mode, the professional does not manage to translate sales management into a career tool or integrate it as a more natural part of the work. In other words, responding to sales management remains mostly a struggle. Hence, strategic compliance is a way for the professionals to approach and deal with the tension they experience when navigating sales as part of their professional work.

A last point regarding the modes is that they should be understood as ideal types in the Weberian sense (Weber, 1947, p. 110f.). That is, in practice, there may be some overlap between the responses. The point with the modes thus is to produce heuristic categories

that enable better understanding of the varieties of the professional response to sales management.

### ***Career mode***

In the career mode, strategic compliance refers to both taking specific actions when it comes to sales that are identifiable as something different from professional work, and a strategic awareness that these activities will benefit the professional's career directly. Anna, a lawyer at the beginning of her career, who has worked at BL since she finished her law degree, expresses this.

*Actually, I think that Sofia and I have been here the longest; therefore, we have been forced to sell a bit longer (than the others). And if you put billable hours into networks, for example, then you want that to generate something - to get something back. If I want to aim at becoming a partner one day, then I have to build a client base. So, it is in my own interest to have a sales strategy, even though it is very difficult, I have not studied this. We have studied law.*

This example shows how Anna approaches sales in a strategic manner. She utilizes sales, both in her short-term and long-term planning, as a tool to reach her professional goals, that is, to advance and build the career she plans for herself. She uses words such as "I have to," "generate," "get something back," "in my own interest," and "becoming partner" to explain why she not only engages in sales but complies with the system of sales control in her firm, even though it is something she feels forced to do.

Anna's excerpt also shows that when the professionals comply strategically in the career mode, sales are, on the one hand, "forced" on the professional but then turned into an instrument of advancement—indicating a more offensive sales strategy. Anna expresses motivation to comply because it serves her self-interest. Sabina, a lawyer, makes a similar point, when she explains that she measures her sales activities because she can benefit from engaging in them: *"I am often out doing network meetings and lunches, so I want to know myself, how much time I actually spend doing that (as) it takes up time from my other assignments."*

Another example of responding to sales management in the career mode is expressed by Kenneth, a senior accountant, with more than 25 years of experience. He is an executive director, one of the highest positions in the organization, which indicates that he has managed to successfully navigate various sales management efforts throughout his career. When asked about his experiences with sales, he told this story of both sales activities and his attitudes toward them:

*From the beginning, when I started (as an accountant), there was not a lot of focus on sales at all. And there was an ethical rule in places where you were not allowed to*

*advertise, etc. It was more like a lot of customers had to call you and ask if they could be your customer. It was like that many years back. Since then, the competition has increased, and the rules have changed. So, suddenly you had to do sales courses and make cold calls and try more. I remember my very first sales course, we got a practical assignment to book customer meetings with completely cold customers that you had no relation to at all. We got this list and then the assignment was to book customer meetings without having a relation to that person and make the sales talk work (...). That was a different experience, mostly when I went to the company and thought to myself: 'what the hell am I doing here? Imagine if someone was a fly on the wall, looking down on that silly conversation'.*

First, Kenneth's story points to the de-regulative changes related to marketing and sales efforts as experienced by the professions. Moreover, it underlines the tension in strategic compliance between sales and the profession. While complying with requirements to do sales courses, make cold calls, and set up sales meetings, Kenneth expresses feeling conflicted, using phrases such as, "what the hell am I doing here?" and "book customer meetings without having a relation." Second, Kenneth expresses how the career mode is a way to manage sales management. Despite the discomfort and conflict, he has actively decided to comply by "trying more" and, implicitly, he communicates that he has managed to comply well, career wise, because he has now reached the position of executive director. He has also, after sales was introduced as something that is part of the professional's work, taken specific offensive actions when it comes to sales, in order to build his client base and develop his career at the firm, such as "sales courses and things and make cold calls." Hence, engaging in strategic compliance in the career mode implies compliance, not only because of sales management control efforts, but also to comply strategically in order to build a career within the profession by turning sales into one's own advantage.

### ***Integration mode***

The integration mode indicates a different way of engaging in strategic compliance, where the professionals are less offensive, in the sense that the career goal is less pronounced. Rather than emphasizing sales as a career instrument, the key characteristic of the integration mode is that the lines between professional work and sales work are perceived to be blurred.

For example, Hans, a lawyer, expresses this when he says: *"I think [professional work and sales work] are floating more or less in and out of each other. I don't think now I'm doing sales. I'm thinking I'm doing my job."* Henrik, an accountant, also expresses the integration succinctly: *"I think [that I] need to do a good job because when we're doing a good job for our customers, we are also selling."* Thus, sales are not seen as a separate activity but rather integrated with the ideal of doing a "good job," to use Henrik's terms.

To elaborate on the type of activity associated with the integration mode, let us turn to Helen, a senior accountant employed at BA for 1 year. Throughout the interview, when Helen is asked to explain how she engages in sales, she keeps accounting for activities where sales is integrated and implicit, rather than separate and explicit. For example, when Helen is asked how she acquired her newest client, she starts off by saying *“that is a long story”* and continues to describe how her interest in teaching accounting, both internally in the PSF and externally at various institutions, led to her acquiring her newest client *“so, that’s how I got my newest client.”*

Helen’s answers express a response to sales management control that translates sales work and blends it as part of her professional work. Helen is using her interest and engagement in education and teaching of accounting to promote herself and expand her professional network. As such, it shows how side activities, based on professional knowledge, can generate new clients for professionals. Helen’s account is focused on her professional accounting skills, while the sales aspect is placed in the background and is not as such a central part of the accounts.

However, it is noteworthy that integration does not take place without struggle, which Helen also expresses: *“It’s very difficult, I think to work with sales, because that’s not the person I am. I am really a bookkeeping person (...).”* Through this dual account of sales—as something difficult and foreign to Helen’s self-identity, but also something that can be thought of as an activity that happens when she engages in everyday professional work such as teaching—Helen indicates that integration does not take place without effort. Rather, even though she finds sales “difficult,” her strategy is still to integrate sales with what she perceives as her professional work. Hence, there is an element of compliance—she would find it easier if the sales-pressure was not there—and strategy—she deals with the sales-pressure by constructing it as an integrated part of her teaching, which seems to help her cope in the long run. Thus, selling accounting services and helping people to organize teaching seem to become almost the same thing. In other words, although this mode is not without struggle, it largely presents sales as integrable with professional work.

### ***Survival mode***

Strategic compliance in the survival mode is characterized by a struggle to deal with pressure to sell and integrate sales in the professional work. Thus, the tension between sales and professional work is more pronounced here than in both the integration and career modes. In order to manage this tension, the professionals attempt to comply with the sales control, but largely fail in the sense that they neither manage to integrate sales into their professional work nor translate sales into a career instrument.

The professionals express this struggle by accounting for feelings of uncertainty and frustration when confronted with sales. For instance, Brian, a lawyer, expresses this: *“it is difficult to know how to promote oneself [...] I was thrown into it [...] without much*

*guidance.*" Allison, an accountant, makes a similar reflection and says, "For me personally sales is kind of...I tend to go the other way." This expresses how, in the survival mode, the professionals struggle more and often choose a more defensive strategy for coping with sales, moving away from sales, rather than attacking or approaching it (which is the case in the career mode).

The struggle and the defensive strategy are exemplified in Charlotte's account below. Charlotte—a senior lawyer with 18 years of experience who has worked at BL for around one year—describes how she was moving from one firm to the next to minimize the sales aspect of her work, searching for the type of sales practices that fit her best, and how she experienced feelings of disillusionment when confronted with sales:

*[At my first job), someone else took care of the incoming assignments and clients. I worked on the complex issues since I am a process-law expert, but I didn't have to do anything else. No sales, no billing and no contact. So, I was in charge of the law, and I actually liked that because I had no experience or even an interest in doing the other things.*

*After that, I tried to run my own law firm [together with another lawyer] for around one year. During that time, I did everything from the beginning to the end, which was also ok. [...] So there, I started to think about the whole sales process, which also meant really taking on sales, from contact with clients and invoicing [...]. It was very good experience, but at the same time I realized, it is not really me.*

*Then I started at another law firm where I could contribute a lot with my specialist knowledge on their big accounts. But they had a system where you had to have your own inflow of clients, otherwise your pay would be very low [...]. The only thing they would pay for, in order for me to get a normal salary, was if I took in new clients and cases, which I was not equally qualified to do [...]. I just felt like this is a lose-lose for me, and I was very disillusioned.*

This example shows how Charlotte struggles to integrate sales practices and professional work. Her account points to a clash between being "on top of the law" and expectations to engage in sales. This, argues Charlotte, has affected both the practical aspects of her work—such as the type of work she is required to do and her salary—and emotional ones—she expresses feeling "disillusioned" and "unqualified." This underlines how complying with sales control is a struggle for Charlotte, which is further manifested by her moving from one firm to another in search of minimizing the sales dimension in her work. However, moving did not relieve the struggle because the new firm worked with incentive pay and sales management that Charlotte feels unqualified to live up to. Although Charlotte expresses dissatisfaction, both during her time at her own firm and the following employment at the

PSF, she nevertheless complies with the sales control and accepts the normalized nature of sales within the firms.

Seeking to minimize the struggle, Charlotte takes a defensive approach, which is exhibited by her move from one firm to the next. It is noteworthy that while exit may be one part of the survival mode—as in Charlotte's case—there may be other ways of pursuing a defensive strategy than moving from firm to firm. For Brian and Allison, for example, the struggle rather meant that they took a step back or went “the other way” and found projects where the struggle associated with sales is minimized. What they all have in common is the defensive strategy—moving away from sales, rather than approaching it.

## **Discussion and concluding remarks**

Our analysis shows that sales management control has a significant effect on professional work: it generates tensions between professional and market ideals that are dealt with through strategic compliance. Strategic compliance is a way of responding to sales management by adhering to rules and expectations in order to achieve goals of professional advancement, which, in turn, reinforces the professionals' membership in their profession. We found that strategic compliance can be undertaken in three modes: career-, integration-, and survival.

First, we respond to calls for more research on how different and often conflicting discourses co-exist in professionals' everyday work experiences (Alvehus, 2018). Our study contributes to this call empirically by providing an insight into the tension ridden conditions of being a member of a profession, with a particular focus on the tension with sales. Traditional understandings of professionalism and sales highlight the conflict between the two, which is supported by our empirical analysis. Nevertheless, our study, like Alvehus', also moves beyond the institutional level and provides an insight into the actor level, describing how the professionals experience and deal with this tension by analyzing their responses to the sales management control. The responses were characterized by a reluctant compliance with the requirement to sell, but also by turning sales control into an instrument for individual goals of professional advancement and reinforcement of professional membership. We thus found that the response was more characterized by compliance, an aspect that was less pronounced in Alvehus' study (2018).

Second, this relates our findings to previous research on control of professional work, particularly studies on how professionals are controlled by ideals to which they are expected to aspire (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2007). Our study shifts the focus to sales to highlight a similar phenomenon: professionals are faced with a system that suggests their aspirations will come true. However, we found a more tension-ridden engagement with the system. While the HRM-system—which was the focus in Alvesson and Kärreman's study—tended to “boost” the self-esteem of the professionals, presenting them as belonging to an elite

(Alvesson & Kärreman, 2007, p. 719), the sales control system rather seems to produce tension and discomfort, which, we suggest, are dealt with through strategic compliance.

Third, our findings indicate that, by complying with the sales management control to be legitimate participants of their profession, the professionals are reproducing the sales discourse. On the one hand, there is an element of autonomy in their appropriation of the sales discourse for their career interests, but, on the other hand, they are reproducing a dynamic that they perceive as potentially conflicted and connected with discomfort. This phenomenon shows a resemblance to Robertson and Swan's (2003) finding that professionals embraced a culture of ambiguity and flexibility, which both instilled a sense of autonomy and disciplined the employees to support organizational goals. However, our case is also different. While the culture of ambiguity observed by Robertson and Swan originated within the PSF as an initiative to improve the quality of their services, the sales control has a stronger connection to forces outside of the firm, being stimulated by a general market orientation among PSFs as well as legislative deregulation (Cooper & Robson, 2006). As a result, a greater extent of de-professionalization may be at stake in the case of sales because the professionals are disciplined by an external source from which they should traditionally be independent (Freidson, 2001).

Fourth, our study shows a resemblance with Darr's (2002; 2006), Sommerlad's (2011), and Lander et al.'s (2012) study pointing out that the market is a central control mechanism within PSFs, where the ability to generate business and meet targets is crucial for the professionals' career advancement. Like Darr (2002; 2006), we found that professionals can, to some extent, be understood as a highly skilled sales force, for whom the boundaries between professionalism and sales are increasingly blurred in their everyday work, influencing how they plan, conduct, and think about their work. Both the engineers in Darr's studies and the lawyers and accountants in our study show signs of resistance to sales management control. In Darr's studies, the resistance shows that the professionals tried to keep sales-related aspects away from their work. Our study suggests that the responses cannot be fully understood in terms of resistance, because the professionals tended to reluctantly accept sales and bring it *into* their work, using it as a tool for career advancement. Thus, when it comes to sales management control, our study indicates that the professionals appropriated sales in order to achieve goals of professional advancement, which, in turn, reinforced their membership in their profession but also the prevalence of sales in their work. This is why we suggest the concept of strategic compliance and its three modes as a way of understanding their responses to sales management control, as located somewhere between resistance and compliance.

Our findings are also relevant in relation to existing studies on hybridity and hybrid professionalism. Literature on hybridity points out that the discussion is increasingly moving away from a dualistic or opposing understanding of managerialism and professionalism toward an interlinked understanding where the two ideals come together and

accommodate each other in the professionals' daily practices (e.g., Kirkpatrick & Noordegraaf, 2015; Noordegraaf, 2015). Our study supports this view, to a certain extent. However, our study also highlights that when it comes to sales, the hybridity is tension-ridden rather than accommodating; struggle and tensions are pronounced and often understood by the professionals themselves as two opposing ideals.

In a broader scheme of things, we suggest that the relevance of strategic compliance might reach beyond the context of professional service firms. In particular, our findings might be relevant for the understanding of public service professionals, a context in which studies point to similar developments of commercialization and note that individual professionals need to navigate a general tension between organizational and occupational professionalism (Evetts, 2011; Noordegraaf, 2015; Taylor & Kelly, 2006; Ulfsdotter Eriksson et al., 2017). Strategic compliance offers a contribution to this literature by presenting a conceptualization of how professionals deal with this tension and how they navigate and respond to sales management in public organizations.

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