Digital Selling Transformation of Business-to-Business Salespeople

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Abstract

As the world becomes more digital, selling organizations seek to meet their customers' requirements by changing their selling processes to digital ones. Extensive research demonstrates the value to customers and the bottom line to become digital, however most investments to digitize selling processes have challenges. Since there is no single playbook to become digital, organizations need to evaluate which technologies to invest in but also how to implement the technologies.

Research is clear that becoming digital in sales is not an additional tool or process, but a fundamental shift and migration of old norms to new ones. The human side to salespeople becoming digital is an important factor in the digital transformation. An analysis of digital selling, digital customers, and digital salespeople will be reviewed. Finally, several policy recommendations will be discussed to help organizations succeed in their transition.

Keywords:

Business-to-business sales, customer relationship management (CRM), salesforce automation (SFA), information technology (IT), social media, artificial intelligence (AI)

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Introduction

The adoption of digital selling technology is a challenge for business-to-business selling organizations. Research demonstrates the multitude of benefits digital selling technology affords an organization and the trend to digitize the selling process has been accelerated by the Covid pandemic (Guenzi & Nijssen, 2021). Digitization is not simply an additional process organizations are integrating, but it is fundamentally changing the way sales is being conducted today (Alvavi & Habel, 2021). Most business-to-business selling organizations have started their digital transformation to stay relevant (Tabrizi et al., 2019). Despite significant investment by organizations to adopt digital selling processes, these investments tend to fail (Denning, 2021).

As sales organizations seek to effectively digitize their business-to-business selling practices, they struggle in both choosing and adopting digital selling technologies. Advancement in digital technology is often identified as the fourth industrial revolution (Syam & Sharma, 2018). In reviewing the sales tools landscape, over 150 sales tools have been identified including technology tools to improve communication and analyze sales data (Altschuler, 2020).

Digital technology adoption in business-to-business sales comes with unique challenges. Business-to-business buyers are also business-to-business consumers, and their buying journey expectations are transferring from their personal purchasing (Mahlamäki et al., 2020). Unlike business-to-consumer sales, business-to-business salespeople tend to assist buyers in the entire buying process (Van Weele, 2018).

The concept of contemporary selling has been around since the early twentieth century as a result of the manufacturing industry (Friedman, 2005). Unlike business-to-consume sales, salespeople in business-to-business sales participate in the entire selling process (Van Weele, 2018). The selling process has been systematically broken down as seven steps (Homburg et al.,

2011). This process has been sought to be digitized to improve organization efficiency and effectiveness.

The challenge in academia and industry is the transformation of current processes towards digital ones to achieve a competitive advantage and improve the transaction efficiencies between buyers and sellers. The adoption of digital selling technology to replace existing processes does have tradeoffs in both processes and performance (Hunter & Perreault, 2007). Among salespeople there is a general reluctance to migrate their selling process to digital forms (Rodriguez et al., 2012). A concern among salespeople is that technology will make them obsolete by removing their value in the selling process (Bongers et al., 2021).

Research on the topic of digital selling technology is heavily skewed towards informing on the benefits of the adoption, but there is limited guidance to help organizations and more importantly salespeople embrace and succeed in this transformation. Research demonstrates that for technology to improve performance, salespeople must believe in the technology and properly embrace it (Rodgriguez et al., 2012). Mullins and Agnihotri (2022) summarize the most common forms of digital selling technology as sales force automation, customer relationship management, information technology, social media, and artificial intelligence. This paper will review the process of sales, the forms of digital selling technology, analyze the digital selling landscape, and provide recommendations for accelerating the digitization of salespeople.

Literature Review

Background: Business-to-Business Selling

Business-to-business sales is different than business-to-consumer sales in many ways including the way salespeople interact with clients as well as the way clients seek out information from salespeople. The role of a modern salesperson as we know it is believed to have taken shape in the late nineteenth/early twentieth century as mass manufacturing emerged (Friedman 2005). Since the emergence of modern sales, the relationship building between salespeople and purchasing clients is a fundamental context of business-to-business relationships (Crosby et al., 1990). Salespeople play a role of building relationships with clients to grow and retain a customer base (Jones et al., 2003). Today, a primary value function of business-to-business sales is to provide value to clients by deeply understanding their needs and helping them solve their problems, this process is referred to as consultative sales.

The role of the salesperson has traditionally been seen as a representative of an organization who seeks to deliver value to buyers and negotiate on behalf of their organization (Hartmann et al., 2018). The concept of consultative selling is believed to have emerged by buyers becoming more sophisticated in their buying process and value being presented by the unique skills the salesperson has to uncover needs (Rackham & Devincentis, 1999). Unique to business-to-business selling contexts, salespeople have been key in helping their clients in the entire purchase process (Van Weele, 2018). A further unique aspect of business-to-business selling is the higher buying volume nature of transactions (Lilien, 2016).

Although selling situations rarely are identical, there are recognized steps in the selling process. Dubinsky (1981) has defined the seven steps of the selling process which has been

validated as extensively researched by (Homburg et al., 2011). The first step is prospecting, which is identifying a target client. Second is pre-approach which includes any preparation needing by the salesperson including market research, internal research, etc. Third is the step, which is making compelling contact with a client seeking an opportunity to learn about their needs and present an offering. Fourth is the presentation where a recommendation is made based on uncovered needs. Fifth is the process of overcoming objections, where any concerns the prospective client has are addressed. Sixth is the close, in which terms of a deal are negotiated and the next steps are affirmed. The Seventh and final step is follow-up to ensure the agreed upon next steps are being achieved and the client is receiving adequate support.

In their research on business-to-business sales, Cuevas (2018) identifies two factors that affect supplier to client relationships. First is the value of information and how more readily available it is to clients. The acceptance of this availability of information has encouraged deeper transparency by suppliers including making positive and negative feedback available through vehicles such as reviews or testimonials. Second is the overall consolidation of players on the supply side due through mergers and acquisitions on both the client and supplier side, giving each party more influence and leverage. Finally, clients are trying to optimize by leveraging efficiencies in procurement.

Information remains a key factor in the value a business-to-business salesperson provides to a client. In the business-to-business selling environment, it's been commonplace that a salesperson has acted as a primary information source in their given field (Cuevas, 2018). There is a shift in the access to clients due to technology. Today the knowledge no longer remains with the salesperson and is often shared between suppliers and clients (Cuevas, 2018).

Value creation is a paramount factor in the role of a business-to-business salesperson. Suppliers and clients can create shared value by innovating products and services to meet client specific needs and adapting these new offers to additional clients with shared needs (Viio & Grönroos, 2014). In order to differentiate and avoid being seen as commoditized, value creation is emerging in the business-to-business environment with a focus on providing service and knowledge (Cuevas, 2018). Clients' needs are increasing in complexity, and as a result the value organizations provide needs to be distributed beyond salespeople, but include technical experts and marketing (Cuevas, 2018). Despite the advancement of technology, in organizations with complicated products or services salespeople play a vital role (Cuevas 2018).

In a study to break down the business-to-business selling processes, it was estimated that a typical decision-making process will require an average of 6.8 people participating in the decision-making process (Toman et al., 2017). In the business-to-business selling model, the selling cycles have evolved and become complex as solution-oriented selling models have become more common (Hartmann et al., 2018). Business-to-business selling organizations typically serve different buying segments (Käuferle & Reinartz, 2015).

Enterprise selling may result in deeper organization integration than consultative selling due to an increased number of participants in the relationship. This relationship may increase cross functional and cross-organization tasks which need to be formalized between the supplier and the client. (Hartmann et al., 2018). Enterprise sales goes beyond consultative selling by helping aggregate the knowledge of the sales teams and organizations (Hartmann et al., 2018). When products a company represents are complex from a technology perspective it's suggested that both technology and salespeople be utilized to support clients (Ahearne & Rapp, 2010).

In conclusion, the business-to-business selling market is blending with the business-to-consumer one. This blending is due to advancements in technology in the business-to-consumer markets and a desire by the business-to-business industry to achieve relevance, efficiency, and maintain relevance. Furthermore, the organizations that created the technology products that have created the e-commerce experiences in business-to-consumers markets seek to increase their market share and disrupt the business-to-business market.

Digital Selling Tools: Sales Force Automation

An emerging advancement in selling is the utilization of salesforce automation. Salesforce automation can be defined as the use of software to replace human worker business processes and tasks (Lhuer, 2016). Salesforce automation utilizes technology to integrate systems and tasks made by salespeople in order to make them more efficient in their work (Ahearne et al., 2005). According to SalesForce (2021) the size of the sales force automation market is expected to reach $13.8 billion by 2027 with a project 10.6 percent compound growth rate. SalesForce adds that approximately 60% of all sales force automations were cloud based and 60% of deployments have been through enterprise organizations while smaller enterprises are starting to catch up. Firms are increasing the transfer of administrative work to salespeople and the opportunity costs are not well accounted for (Hunter & Perreault, 2017). Customers are changing their behaviors to independent gathering of information and not relying on salespersons (Syam and Sharma, 2018). A benefit of salesforce automation is in some cases, a client may be able to navigate to find products and services, possibly even complete simple transactions without the need of a salesperson (Thaichon et al., 2018)

Ultimately organizations seek to increase their competitive advantages and believe salesforce automation may help. A simple goal sought by salesforce automation may be to free up salespeople's time by reducing administrative and non-sales-oriented activities to allow them to focus on client relevant activities instead (Hunter & Perreault, 2007). It is estimated that as much as 40% of sales tasks have the potential to become automated (Valdivieso de Uster, 2020). Sales force automation tools are sought by business-to-business organizations who are trying to improve their efficiency (Mahlamaki et al., 2020). It is estimated that selling organizations have already automated at least one sales process (Baig et al., 2020). In a recent study it was determined that the average salesperson spends 27.9% of their time in a CRM (Larsen & Parry, 2017).

Sales force automation like other digital selling tools have been identified as being poorly adopted by salespeople. Mahlamaki et al., (2020) conducted research built on the Unified Theory of Acceptance and use of Technology and focused to understand perceived usefulness by salespeople as is relates to ease of use and perceived usefulness. In order to answer this research question in the business-to-business context, Finish distribution companies were solicited acquiring 115 responses with a make of respondents ranging from salespeople to CEO's. A conclusion reached was that sales force automation not only provided the information clients sought but also provided an insight into the decision-making process of clients to better understand their needs and purchasing process. Another conclusion was that the perceived usefulness had more weight to both the salespeople and customers utilizing the sales force automation tools.

In modern business-to-business selling organizations sales and marketing departments are complementary to one another. Marketing plays a key role in both providing content to

prospective clients and acquiring knowledge based on the activities of the clients. Salesforce automation automate both content delivery and data analysis (Mero et al., 2020). Marketing functions may automate lead acquisition from data may be facilitated through customer relevant platforms such as webinars, chat, and social media (Dwivedi et al., 2021).

Organizations are increasingly introducing salesforce automation solutions. In research by Corsaro (2018) it's been determined that the effectiveness of salesforce automation depends on the organization integrating the new digital and conventional interactions. Furthermore, Corsaro believes that a fluid relationship approach is required in order to effectively migrate conventional interactions towards digital ones.

In an early salesforce automation research study, the role of sales and marketing tools was explored and (Järvinen & Taiminen, 2016) recommended organizations must utilize the data acquired from sales and marketing automation tools to acquire macro data to reflect on internal opportunity for process improvement. Salespeople may gain a net positive experience if they can use sales technology to reduce non sales activities (Hunter & Perreault, 2017).

There are many examples of how sales force automation can change both the selling and buying experience. It is claimed that the process of automation has fundamentally changed both the buying and selling process in that now tasks once retained by the salespeople have shifted to the client such as education or technical support (Mahlamäki et al., 2020). A task that could encompass sales force automation, customer relationship management, artificial intelligence is the process of having technology evaluate external databases to gather sales lead information (Moncrief, 2017). An example of salesforce automation is the use of sales configurators which may allow clients to complete purchases process without the need of a salesperson (Mahlamäki

et al., 2020). Another example of sales force automation includes tasks such as sending initial emails to potential sales leads (Hallikainen, et al., 2018).

In conclusion, salesforce automation is likely the single most disruptive concept towards digital selling. The mere concept of using technology to displace steps in the selling process invokes the fears of obsolescence in selling professionals. However, when utilized properly, the real benefit of salesforce automation should be to empower salespeople to use them time more effectively and allow technology to replace simple and routine tasks that have in the past been burdensome and instead use their time for relationship development and consultation.

Digital Selling Tools: Customer Relationship Management

Of the five digital selling tools discussed in this research, Customer Relationship Management (CRM) is the most known and understood tool. Hunter et al. (2006) identifies that SFA and CRM are often seen as synonymous, however they establish a baseline that CRM tools help salespeople manage customers, communications with customers, and manage leads, further CRM tools provided data for leadership on salesperson performance and the data may be utilized for forecasting purposes. Hunter et al. (2006) identify SFA as tools that help salespeople complete routines tasks more effectively and efficiently, some tasks which may be informed by the CRM. An example of how customer relationship management software helps salespeople is by tracking all client communications and guiding a salesperson on follow-ups (Rangarajan et al. 2020).

In the family of digital selling tools, CRM represents the largest share of adoption in the United States and Globally. CRM market is expected to reach 123.8 billion by 2027 and is growing at a compound growth rate of 12.2% according to Normans Media Ltd (2022). Further,

Normans Media Ltd noted that small and medium enterprises are growing at 15.8% CAGR expecting to represent $58 of the market by 2027. It was noted by Normans Media Ltd that in 2020 49.6% of the global market of CRM adoption was in the United States. In a recent study the largest CRM provider Salesforce (2020) reported that organizations are spending more on technology per salesperson than merely CRM but are also focuses on data acquisition and analysis.

A consideration of CRM systems is how it affects the selling process of salespeople, particular if it inhibits their ability to be adaptive or creative. A contemporary process used by business-to-business salespeople is consultative selling where a salesperson becomes an expert in their product and industry and provides customized information and education (Anderson & Dubinsky, 2004). CRM implementations often come with implementation challenges a in part due to the cross-department nature of the tool including sales, marketing, and service (Lauzi et al., 2023). In early CRM periods, cross functional coordination amongst internal departments was seen as a major concern (Bligh & Turk, 2004), nearly two decades after their research the same conclusion remains.

To understand if digital selling technology such as CRM affects a salespersons ability to adapt to individual client needs, Rapp et al. (2018) conducted research on the sales force technology and adaptive selling. They conducted a study of 662 health care salespeople to understand various effects of digital selling technology. Key to the research was the conclusion that CRM technology has a positive impact on adaptive selling with the belief that the data acquired through the system will help the salesperson develop more appropriate sales calls and better cater their presentations to the needs of the client.

In their literature review, Rapp et al. (2018) reached the following conclusions about CRM in selling organizations. First, CRM when used correctly help salespeople develop personalized selling strategies. Second, optimal utilization is dependent on the salespeople's ability to analyze the data acquired by a CRM tool in order to reach meaningful conclusions. Finally, it's believed that CRM will help accelerate the selling processes as well as improve long-term relationship building efforts. Despite the potential benefits of data automation, CRM processes are often not effective implemented, and sales workflows are not effectively migrated (Salesforce, 2022).

In conclusion, customer relationship management software is for many salespeople their first introduction to digital selling technology. CRM products by themselves offer tremendous value. When CRM is coupled with sales force automation and information technology, CRM provides tremendous value to organizations and salespeople alike.

Digital Selling Tolls: Information Technology

Information technology (IT) is a very broad term today related to the use of technology to gather, process, or create information. In an overview of information technology, Whitson (2020) describes the nature of information technology as the expertise of creating and maintaining information. Whitson adds that this includes the software, hardware, systems, integrations, etc. Beohlje and Langemeier (2021) describe information technology having evolved dramatically over the last three decades starting in the 1990's when data reliability reached a point that it empowered better decision making, in particular that the benefits acquiring and synthesizing data had outweighed their respective costs. Boehle and Langemeire break information technology

fundamentally as the process of processing data through theories or models in order to achieve useful information.

IT has a well-documented measure of value to support activities related to sales. First IT assists in acquiring client needs which accelerates product development (Saldanha et al., 2017). Second, IT plays a key role is market forecast in both demand and supporting sales forces (Gomez et al., 2017). Third, IT data helps sales departments determine the best timing to launch new products or services to the market (Tambe et al., 2012).

Investments in IT infrastructure is inherently aligned with the way a firm evaluates its value creation. In a study on the behaviors of executives purchasing stock related to major investments in IT by Havakhor et al. (2022) suggest that such investments encourage more personal investment by these executives. Although much research indicates positive outcomes from IT investments, Karhade and Dong (2021) have determined in their research that there are opportunities for overinvesting with diminishing returns.

In conclusion, information systems have predated digital selling technology but in the advancement of customer relationship management and salesforce automation, information technology provides the backbone for data analysis and support of salespeople. Organizations now capture tremendous amounts of data on their prospective buyers, both by salespeople and the buyers themselves as they interact with organizations at many stages including customer service, web experiences, and more. The data captured requires a strong information technology backbone in order to synthesize the data to provide meaningful information for improved decision making and sales strategy.

Digital Selling Tools: Social Media

Social media may be defined as the utilization of software to support interactions among people with the goals of creating community as well as creating and distributing content (Von Krogh, 2012). Today social media in sales plays a key role in lead generation, client qualification, and customer acquisition by leverage the data acquired (Agnihotri, 2020). In business-to-business selling contexts, social media technology provides salespeople an opportunity to engage their clients within their networks with content created by their organizations (Agnihotri, 2020).

The benefits of digital selling technology in the form of social media are not limited to organizations with large and technical marketing departments. Small and medium enterprises may receive additional benefits from social media than larger organizations because it allows easier access to customers and cost-effective ways to create content and acquire leads (Rodriquez et al. 2012). In a recent survey by eMarketer (2017) it was determined that 8 out of 10 small to medium firms have a social media presence and 99% of larger firms do as well. The access social media provides organizations of all sizes creates an opportunity for content creation and client access.

In research on the topic of social media and the effect of sales Wang et al. (2020) recognize the value of social media's immediate access to audiences but recognize the risk association with too much content and appearing too mass marketed rather than customized. Too often the content that is distributed is irrelevant to the recipient and too much content was determined to result in reduced sales outcome in the study conducted by Wang et al. (2020). Further, a benefit identified by Wang is that social media marketing can help organizations better understand the needs of their clients.

The value of social media to organizations has had extensive research. In a study seeking to understand the influence social media has on sales process and performance, it was determined that the social media had a positive outcome on performance and result in firm competitiveness (Enyinda et al., 2020). Despite research on positive outcomes, the topic of how salespeople see value in social media yields different results. A recent survey evaluating salespeople's utilization of social media on a scale of 0-10 resulted in 3.84 (Guesalaga, 2016). More recently on a scale of 1-7, salespeople reported social media's usefulness as 2.72 (Bill et al., 2020). Reflecting on low social media adoption by business-to-business salespeople Bill et al. (2020) conducted research to understanding low adoption by building a framework off of the Unified Technology and Use. A consideration by Bill et al. (2020) was that social media may not be an effective tool for business-to-business sales, so they sought to explore this question. Their research had two focused questions 1) why salespeople use or avoid social media and 2) in which conditions do business-to-business salespeople increase customer loyalty through social media. Their research concluded that salespeople believed social media usefulness was a 2.72 on a 1-7 scale and that social media helped foster long term loyalty at a 2.56 on the same scale. This finding indicates that despite years of usage and major investments by organizations in social media, the salespeople still fail to see value in the digital selling technology of social media.

From a sales performance standpoint, social media can assist salespeople be more effective in their roles. Social media provides access to customers which help salespeople overcome increasing barriers to connect (Schendzielarz et al., 2022). Sales research affirms that social media as part of digital selling helps salespeople perform (Appel et al., 2020).

In conclusion, social media is one of the faster growing digital selling tools in business-to-business sales. Unlike other digital selling platforms, the buyer has an active opportunity to

participate in the system and content creation can become collaborative between the organization and its employees. Finally, this platform is one of business-to-consumer experiences that nearly all constituents have personal experience in.

Digital Selling Tools: Artificial Intelligence

In many industries and ways of life, artificial intelligence may evoke feelings of uncertainty and job replacement. In their research on artificial intelligence and sales, Kumar et al. (2019) provide a comprehensive definition of what artificial intelligence is today in the sales and marketing space. Artificial intelligence is defined as the utilization of using computers with software and algorithms that can perform tasks previously performed by humans. AI technology resides in a space of automation and learning. The automation and learning are facilitated by collecting and synthesizing data and training other machines on how to process the data. Examples provided by the authors included consumer technology familiar to many including personal assistants like Alexa the home automation technology by Amazon or financial tools such as robo investing by companies like Schwab or Fidelity. In both examples, the technology learns from data and makes recommendations or automatically acts based on data that's available.

Artificial intelligence as a concept can be adapted to many aspects of enterprise. In their research on artificial intelligence in the business-to-business sales channel, Seidenstrickerand Holopainen (2022) summarize the eight process that may be accomplished through artificial intelligence. Examples of how artificial intelligence can be utilized include client profiling, chatbots, personalized recommendations, dynamic pricing, order processing, emotional support, marketing strategy, rapid prototyping. Each example will be expanded upon.

Client profiling is a process that has existed in the selling process for some time. As organizations capture and retain vast amounts of data, salespeople are incapable of synthesizing the data to reach conclusions from the client's behaviors. Examples of client data may include demographic information, browsing behaviors acquired through cookies, past interactions, or past purchase patterns (Paschen et al., 2019). Another example of profiling may to reflect inward from a staffing standpoint and determining the ideal employee profile to service the needs of their clients (Zoltners et al., 2021). Finally, the profiling may extend beyond client or employee data, but reach to competitive landscapes to identify completive gaps and advantages (Huang & Rust, 2021). Artificial intelligence can be helpful to salespeople by helping with data analysis on historical patterns from customer relationship management data and social media data and can help provide conclusions on performance (Rangarajan et al., 2020).

An example of artificial intelligence many may be familiar with are chatbots. Chatbots provide more personalized support to clients acting in the absence of an employee to provide information or answer questions. In the selling context, chatbots can be effective at providing clients product recommendations based on defined inputs or answering questions (Bongers et al., 2021). As a means to improve salesperson efficiency, chatbots can be useful at answering common questions that would otherwise be answered by salespeople (Singh et al., 2019). Finally, chatbots may be useful at initiative selling interactions by contacting prospective clients (Davenport et al., 2020).

One area that artificial intelligence can provide great value to salespeople is providing personalized recommendations directly to a client or even to the salesperson. With artificial intelligence's unique way to process data to profile clients, recommendations may be developed by the profiling data in ways not achievable by the salesperson (Seidenstricker and Holopainen,

2022). The product recommendation phase of the selling process could potential be semi-automated where the follow-up steps could be created or fully executed by artificial intelligence Seidenstricker and Holopainen (2022). An example of artificial intelligence in the selling process may be to have the technology make personalized offers to prospective clients based on their stored customer data (Kumar et al., 2019).

Another example of utilizing artificial intelligence in the selling process is through the utilization of dynamic pricing. Dynamic pricing refers to a price offer made based on a belief on the client's willingness to commit based on a given price. Bongers et al. (2021) identify that artificial intelligence can assume or support the negotiate stages of selling be leveraging profile data. Finally, personalized incentives may also be recommended as part of the dynamic pricing offer such as special credit terms or shipping rates (Huang and Rust, 2021).

An aspect of the selling process that may be familiar to many consumers is order processing. Sales is both about creating demand and executing, one of the aspects of executing sales is processing sales. According to Syam and Sharma (2018) a step in the selling workflow after negotiating is purchasing data acquisition, transmitting, processing, and collection of payment. In their opinion these steps may be augment or replaced utilizing artificial intelligence. Bongers et al. (2021) add that order management include status updates may also be assumed by artificial intelligence.

Another aspect identified as useful to business-to-business sales is emotional support. An example of using artificial intelligence is to profile clients based on their facial expressions and using technology to associate these signs to code outcomes (Bhardwaj & Shipley, 2020). Another example may be to use artificial intelligence to help the salespeople by providing them emotional support in their roles (Davenport et al., 2020).

Marketing strategy is another potential opportunity for artificial intelligence. Utilizing vast amounts of consumer data, artificial intelligence can analyze carefully how to best communicate to prospective clients (Davenport et al., 2020). From a mass marketing to personalized marketing standpoint, it's believed artificial intelligence can be helpful in adapting to customer preferences (Huang and Rust, 2021). Finally, it's believed from a sales process standpoint that artificial intelligence marketing can be using at any stage in the sales journey Seidenstricker and Holopainen (2022).

The last identified facet for artificial intelligence in business-to-business sales is rapid prototyping. Overlaying each step in the selling journey with data and probability, technology can help optimize client or overall organizational strategies (Syam & Sharma, 2018). This level of data optimization is believed to be particularly helpful in the overcoming objections stage Seidenstricker and Holopainen (2022).

Despite the belief that artificial intelligence may be inserted or replace aspects of the selling stages by Seidenstricker and Holopainen (2022), it's still understood that we are far from that level of adoption. General literature provides some broad conclusions about artificial intelligence in the sales process. Selling firms are early in their journey to adopt artificial intelligence as a tool to enable a client buying experience (Singh et al., 2019). As aspect of artificial intelligence that is unique to other forms of technology is that the processes substituted by are being personalized (Kumar et al., 2019). Utilizing artificial intelligence will provide salespeople with more opportunities to interaction and by extension influence their clients (Thaichon et al., 2018).

In a review of artificial intelligence in digital selling, Syam and Sharma (2018) opine that automation and technology in sales to date has been vastly limited to standardizing activities and

utilizing technology as a supporting tool rather than a primary driver. Sales training based on artificial intelligence can be monitored and feedback can be gathered on effectiveness (Singh et al., 2019). As artificial intelligence technologies improve over time, it's helpful to reevaluate which steps in the selling process may benefit from being automatic with a form of artificial intelligence (Rapp & Beeler, 2021). Although it's understood that artificial intelligence will contribute to some positive outcomes for clients, there are factors to consider including the including the dependence of the salesperson on this technology or the validity of the salesperson's experiences (Rapp & Beeler, 2021)

In extensive research on the topic of digitization of sales specifically in the business-to-business selling process, Fischer et al. (2022) concluded that every step in the selling process can be replaced or supplemented with the utilization of artificial intelligence. Despite the personal selling aspect of selling, Fischer et al. (2022) believes artificial intelligence technology can understand human emotions and the behaviors of both the salesperson and the client and can make predictions to help improve the effectives and efficiency of selling situations. Despite the advantages, Fischer et al. (2022) believe today AI is not ready to simply replace salespeople but a tool to be used by each party in appropriate situations.

In conclusion, artificial intelligence is a newer concept to digital selling. The concept has been more science fiction rather than reality until recent years where the technology is real and in common applications. Similar to sales force automation, artificial intelligence is a major disruptor to the tasks and steps in the selling process, however salespeople should view the technology as an accelerator to sales not as a detractor in their role in an organization.

Analysis

The analysis of this topic will integrate the literature review, theoretical foundations, and provide a foundation for policy recommendations. The literature review demonstrated the background of business-to-business sales and the five forms of digital selling technology available. This section will analyze the three major themes of this paper. The first theme is the digitization of sales. The second theme is the digitization of customers. The third theme is the digitization of salespeople. The third theme of digital salespeople will be expanded through four theories.

Digitization of Sales

The first perspective is that sales is becoming digital, and salespeople cannot be substituted by technology. In their research Ahearne and Rapp (2010) conclude that technology cannot substitute a salesperson from a persuasive standpoint. Firstly, it is determined that a factor of timing is key specifically aspects related to picking up on cues and demonstrating offerings based on uncovered needs. Secondly reciprocity, which suggests people have a desire to react favorably towards others if they feel good work or services has been provided to them. Thirdly, people react favorably towards authority figures and in some circumstances, salespeople's representing expertise in their industry may possess a position of authority. Finally, knowledge is seen as the last key factor, which salespeople may possess the knowledge of persuasion which technology may not likely substitute.

There may be tremendous value to an organization who chooses to adopt digital selling technology. Technology may improve the value provided by salespeople to clients by focusing on improving the efficiency and communication (Guenzi & Habel, 2020). Sales technology can

help salespeople better understand the needs the needs of their clients and as a result augment the value of their relationship (Rodriguez & Honeycutt, 2011). Business-to-business selling has been disrupted by technology and sales processes are evolving to incorporate selling technologies including artificial intelligence (Singh et al., 2019).

Despite the extensive research on the benefits to organizations to adopt digital selling technology there are many complications with effective integration. The adoption of new technology in sales has a long practice with extensive research (Mattila et al., 2021). Adoption of technology by salespeople involves tradeoffs and performance implications of technology adoption are not fully understood (Hunter & Perreault, 2007). The digital transformation of sales may be defined as the process to transfer existing business processes to digital ones to meet the demands of customers (Guenzi and Habel 2020). Another definition of the digital transformation of sales may be defined as the use of digital technology software applications to advance aptitudes and use data to evaluate the value proposition of an organization (Singh et al., 2019).

In the current business-to-business selling environment an increased numbers of processes are moving digitally. Currently e-commerce has enjoyed explosive transition in the business-to-consumer market but the business-to-business market lags behind (Bongers et al., 2021). In research in business-to-business selling, e-commerce refers to the entire procurement process being handled digitally (Van Weele, 2018). It is estimated that the e-commerce market increased from $5.826 billion to $12.216 billion from 2013 to 2019 (Mehta & Hamke, 2019). It is estimated that 17% of all US business-to-business purchases will be processed digitally in 2023 (Clement, 2020). Despite a desire to migrate purchasing towards an E-commerce environment, it's still understood to be best suited for simple off the shelf transactions (Hoar,

2015). Buying clients with complex needs such as those dealing with projects or technology require personalized consultation through personal selling (Bongers et al., 2021).

Defining digital selling technology, the three categories of such technology require definition. In a study of technology and sales it was identified that technology may have three facets (Ahearne & Rapp, 2010). The first may be salesperson-oriented, which is exclusively utilized by a salesperson such as a CRM tool. The second may be customer-oriented, such as a website product configurator or chat bot. Lastly, it may be shared by both salespeople and clients such as social media.

In recent years business-to-business sales have evolved in that the roles and expectations of the seller and buyer have changed. Clients are becoming increasingly more powerful in their independent acquisition of information (Cuevas, 2018). In business, the roles of salespersons are essential because it links a customer's needs and the firm's ability to meet or exceed those needs (Pullins et al., 2020).

Although research emphasizes the advantages of digitizing sales, there are still limitations with the use of digital technologies. When products or services offer high levels of customization it's beneficial for salespeople to ask the client questions to match them to the correct products or services (Ahearne & Rapp, 2010). Although customized products and services still require the support of salespeople, there are tasks that can be substituted by technology. Certain purchasing situations such as rebuys may be substituted by technology eliminating the need for a salesperson (Ahearne & Rapp, 2010). For organizations who have complicated selling avenues, the migration towards digital selling will likely face greater obstacles (Alamaki & Korpela, 2021).

In conclusion, the selling space is being disrupted by technology and salespeople have an opportunity to embrace the change. Data supports the productivity gains to organizations by

investing in digital selling technology, but the research indicates the reluctance of "analog" salespeople to graduate to the digital space. With the rapid advancements in technology and data supporting digital selling is here to stay, a new breed of digital salesperson will need to emerge.

Digital Customers

The second perspective and a key driver towards the digitization of sales is the expectations of business-to-business customers and their desire for digital capabilities from their salespeople and selling organizations. The business-to-consumer world has introduced decision makers to technology and clients in business-to-business purchasing capacities expect these shifts to their professional worlds (Mahlamäki et al., 2020). In order to stay relevant, sales organizations need to adapt to the new breed of customer.

To understand the changing expectations of customers, the links between their purchasing journeys need to be understood. Historically, the three markets of business-to-business, business-to-consumer, and consumer to consumer have been understood but their links are not a focus of research (Gummesson & Polese, 2009). Due to digital advancements and transcending customer expectations (Mingione and Leoni, 2020), looking at markets as exclusive is not realistic any longer (Dant & Brown, 2008). In recent research on selling channels Bacile (2020) concluded that the boundaries between business-to-business, business-to-consumer, and consumer to consumer are indistinct.

As markets need to be reevaluated, how organizations service these markets may need revaluation as well. Research proposes looking at markets as being business-to-business which relates to business-to-consumer (Mingione & Leoni, 2020). Technologies that clients have enjoyed in business-to-consumer and consumer to consumer markets are now transitioning to

and become adopted in business-to-business markets (Fischer at al., 2022). Research is starting

to shift beyond the business-to-consumer market and extending into business-to-business (Boyd

& Koles, 2019).

As customers are more knowledgeable, they desire to continue acquiring knowledge

about products and services. It is paramount that the digital channels provide the information

customer seek to be readily available and any information not available be provided very quickly

by the organization (Wengler et al., 2021). When chat media are available, customers feel

uncomfortable speaking with chatbots (Davenport et al., 2020). Today chatbot technologies are

limited by their social competencies and emotional awareness in client interactions (Paschen et

al., 2020).

As the role of sales has adapted, so has the role of purchasing clients. A recent research

study conducted by Bages-Amat et al. (2020) as a result of the Covid pandemic and how

decision making has been affected in the selling process. Their research determined that 70-80%

of decision makers prefer the option of making purchases remotely and value having self-service.

It is believed that today's business-to-business buyers as well as business-to-consumer buyers are

more education about the products and services available to them, as such they bring some level

of knowledge to a sales meeting before interacting with a salesperson (Singh et al., 2019).

Putting in perspective, the data is clear about how digital customers see and prefer digital

mediums. In research focused on business-to-business customers, McKinsey (2021) determined

that these customers prefer self-serve and remote human interactions 68-71% of the time.

Another McKinsey (2022) survey concluded that customers preferred e-commerce platforms and

considered them more effective for more expensive purchases. Finally, in research on the

customer driven change in digital selling, Giovannetti et al. (2022) concluded that in the business-to-business space, the digital transformations in the buying process are here to stay.

In conclusion, sales cannot be digitized if the customer does not desire digitization. Consumer behavior is a key driver towards the digitization of sales. The world has become very digital, and the Covid-19 pandemic has also accelerated a digital world. Consumers expect digital experiences and a heightened level of responsiveness and empowerment.

Digital Salespeople

The third perspective in the digitization of sales and customers is the digitization of the salespeople. The play Death of a Salesman from 1949 could not have anticipated digital selling, but the prototypical salesperson describes as one unwilling or unable to change (Hartman, 2006). Digital selling adoption is more than adopting a single piece of new technology such as a word processor, digital selling technologically radically alters the processes that salespeople have utilized possibly for long periods of time (Kalaignam et al., 2021). Although organizations struggle in becoming digital, it's believed salespeople lead change in their industries (Giovanetti et al., 2020).

Research on the topic of digital salespersons is often related to the current state of performance of selling teams, both in their effectiveness as well as organizations ability to retain and effectively equip their selling teams. Today business-to-business organizations face tremendous headwinds including increased client expectations, digitization projects, contemporary supply chain issues, and the lingering effects of a global pandemic (Sharma et al., 2020). Against these contemporary challenges these organizations face, an emerging one exists in increasing productivity in their most valued asset which is their salespeople (Lauzi et al.,

2023). In research on business-to-business selling, specifically focused on new and digital methods of reaching customers, McKinsey (2022) determined that 91% of respondents have more success than legacy models.

From a salespersons point of view, adopting new technology creates fear of their value and there is inherent doubt within the profession about the suitability of technology to replace their vital role. Salespeople may be suspicious about utilizing new technology (Rangarajan et al., 2020). Salespeople may be reluctant to accept and utilize new technology in their roles as expected by their organizations (Rodriguez et al., 2012). Salespeople are concerned what the possibility of sales automation means for their roles (Valdivieso de Uster 2020).

In order to transform to digital organizations, salespeople must become digital as well. Digital technologies will require a change in skills requirements of salespeople to effectively leverage technology to satisfy the needs of their clients (Bongers et al., 2021). Digging deeper into the transformation, organizations need to deeply evaluate the sales function because their roles will require more expertise and speed in responding to client's needs (Corsaro & Maggioni, 2022).

Salespeople who have accepted and adopted digital selling technology have been able to deliver increased value to their clients. Although many aspects of digital selling technologies allow salespeople to improve or replace existing work practices, they may also allow for the creation of new value drivers (Hunter & Perreault, 2007). Salespeople are relying on technology to help assist in qualifying clients as well as identifying the ideal solution recommendation resulting in improved sales performance (Hunter & Perreault, 2007). Value creation by business-to-business salespeople often requires creating value by presenting solutions that are driven by data, which will alter the required skills by the salesperson (Hunter & Perreault, 2017).

Technology has increased the volume of sales operation tasks, including using technology to better understand their clients' cost and profitability models. The same is true of clients better understanding the investments made by selling organizations as well as their profitability models (Cuevas, 2018). But for them to adopt they must see value in what they are adopting, in systems such as CRM are not adopted when salespeople do not see value in adopting them (Scott, 2018).

The global pandemic affected many ways of life for nearly everyone in the world, but business-to-business salespeople were some of the most challenged. Since the Covid-19 pandemic customers changed the quantity of purchasing engagements and their preferred communication patterns (Sharma et. al., 2020). Covid change and possible accelerated the migration towards different communication and digital sales technology (Giovannetti et. al., 2020). The Covid pandemic accelerated technology adoption and sales process change (Hartman & Lussier, 2022), but there has been little research on the effects to salespeople. The adoption of digital selling technology changes the process of salespeople imposing a burden on them (Guenzi and Nijssen, 2021).

In their research on digital selling transformation, Fischer et al. (2022) proposed the characteristics of a digital sales force. Their work divided the characteristics into two distinct categories, abilities and mindset. Abilities including understanding the digitization of the market, the ability to sense the market and learn from it the ability to deal with data, understanding the customers orientation, facilitating functional coordination, coping with various sales channels. The mindset requirements include an orientation for learning, an orientation for performance, and to be innovative.

Digital Salespeople: Unified Theory of Acceptance and use of Technology

The first theory explored in this paper is The Unified Theory of Acceptance and Use of Technology (UTAUT). Technology acceptance theories and models attempt to understand the behaviors of individuals and their acceptance of technology (Momani, 2020). The theory was developed by Venkatesh et al. (2003) by blending a variety of behavioral studies theories in order to provide a comprehensive understanding of individuals acceptance of technology (Momani & Jamous, 2017).

This theory provides both a framework and constructs to help evaluate the acceptance of technology by users by outlining the factors of the individuals that affect their acceptance which includes gender, age, years of experience, and voluntariness of use; these variables are correlated to the performance expectancy of technology, effort expectancy, social influence, and facilitating conditions (Momani, 2020). When these variables are correlated, they can be used to understand use behaviors by users. In order for salesperson to become digital salesperson, they need to be willing to accept technology. UTAUT was able to explain approximately 60% variation for technology use and adoption (Venkatesh et al., 2003)

Figure 1

Unified Theory of Acceptance and Use of Technology
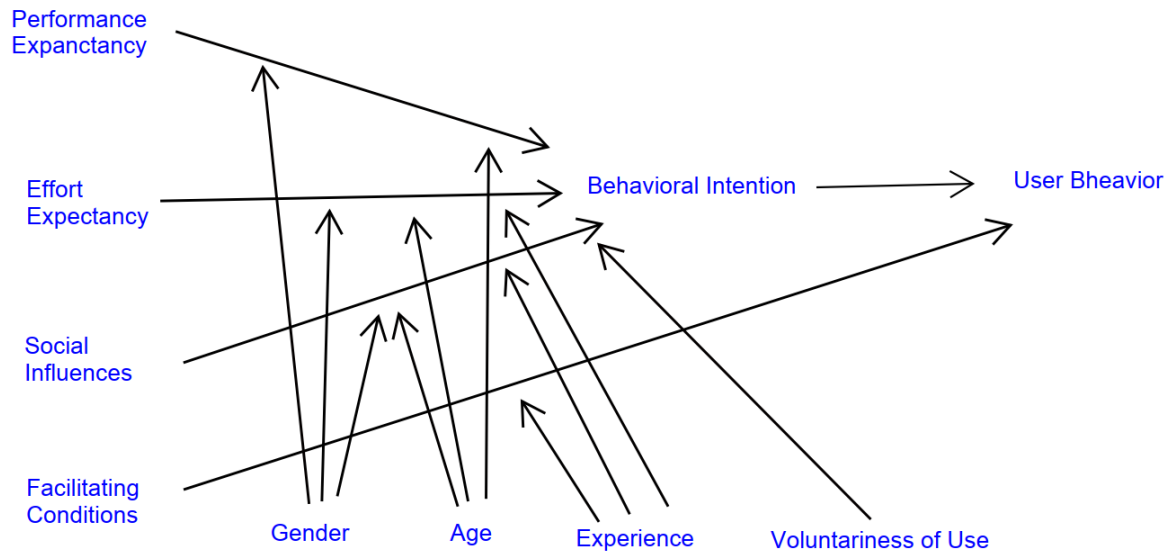
Note: This figure demonstrates the elements of the theory which indicates which factors affect the behavioral intentions and ultimate behaviors of individuals. (Venkatesh et al., 2003, p. 447)

Digital Salespeople: Job Demands- Resource Theory

The second theory explored in this paper is the job demands-resource theory. The theory was originally introduced by Demerouti et al. (2001) as a theory to understand employee burnout in the workplace. The theory focuses on four categories which are used to understand the positive and negative effects job demands have on psychology including demands, resources, strain, and engagement (Bakker, et al., 2010). The theory has been used in hundreds of articles and studies and has evolved as a theory to focus on the happiness of employees (Demerouti & Bakker, 2016).

In their research on digital technology adoption, Demerouti et al. (2001) identified both favorable and unfavorable physiological effects were observed at the individual level. In their research on digital selling adoption, (Guenzi & Nijssen, 2021) applied the job demands-resource theory to digital selling adoption by salespeople. In Guenzi and Nijssen's research, they proposed a Job demands-resource theory for digital selling technology focused related excessive workload, uncertainty reduction initiatives related stress, usefulness, and integration; these variables are correlated to gender, age, experience, and number of clients.

In applying the job demand-resource framework a sample of 206 salespeople were engaged to determine their adoption of digital selling technology (Guenzi & Nijssen, 2021). Their conclusions indicated digital technology related excessive workload represented 18% of the digital adoption. Digital technology usefulness represented 39.4% of digital adoption. Perceived digital technology related stress affected digital adoption by 40%. Finally, digital technology integration, which was defined as the tasks salespeople perform and how they perform them, represented 34.6% of adoption.

Figure 2

Job Demand-Resource Model of digital transformation in sales.
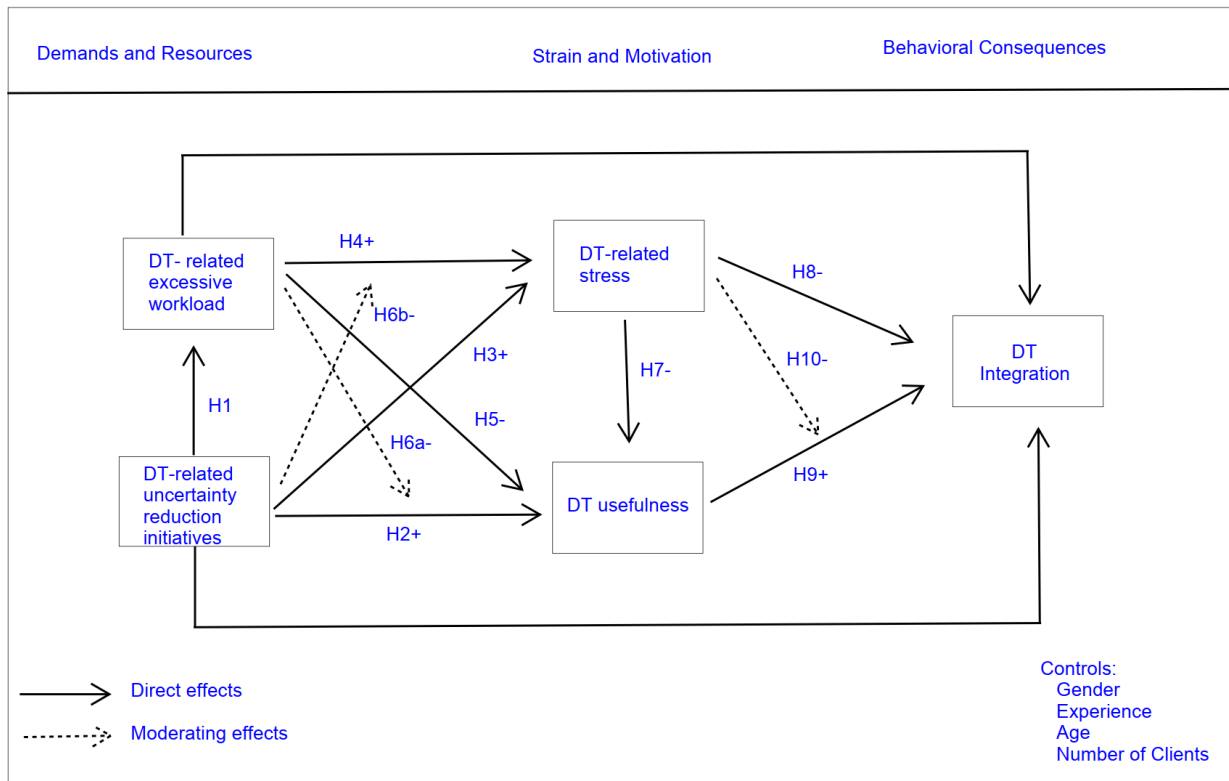
Note: This figure demonstrates the elements of the theory which indicates which factors affect digital integration. (Guenzi & Nijssen, 2021, p.136)

Digital Salespeople: Theory of Reasoned Action

The third theory explored in this paper is the theory of reasoned action. The theory has been adapted to many theories and models originating as a method to understand what shapes behavior. Fishbein and Ajzen (1975) demonstrated attitudes towards act/behavior and subjective norms affect behavioral intentions which influence behavior. Attitudes towards act/behavior is defined as "an individual's positive or negative feelings about performing the target behavior

(Fischein and Ajzen, 1975, p.216). Subjective norms are defined as "the person's perception that most people who are important to him think he should or should not perform the behavior in question" (Fischer and Ajzen, 1975, p. 302).

The theory is one of the oldest technology acceptance theories that has wide utilization (Momani and Jamous, 2017). Theory of reasoned action was connected to sales technology and social media by Hsu and Lin (2008) and connected attitudes towards sales technology if the user has the perception that it enhances their knowledge and subjective norms if the norms infer that the behavior will result in incentive or avoiding reprimand. Finally in their research on social media in business-to-business sales, Itani et al. (2017) built upon previous theory of reasoned action concluded that hiring individuals will digital selling technology skills is important, but more importantly the organization needs to define the strategy to provide appropriate guidance to their salesperson.

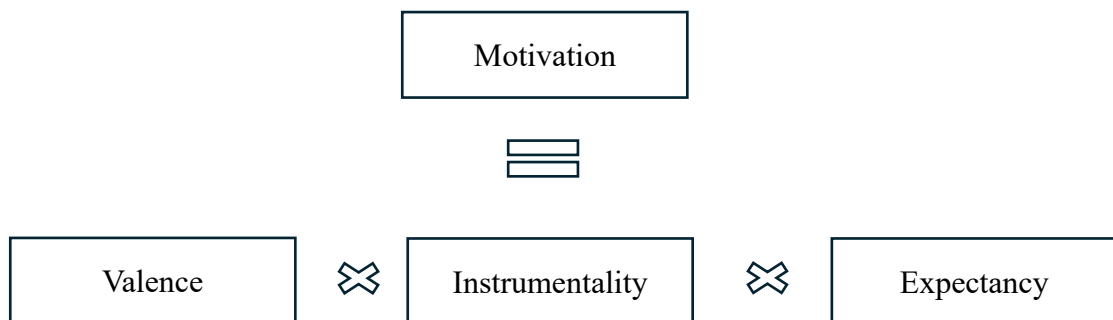**Figure 3**

Theory of Reasoned Action
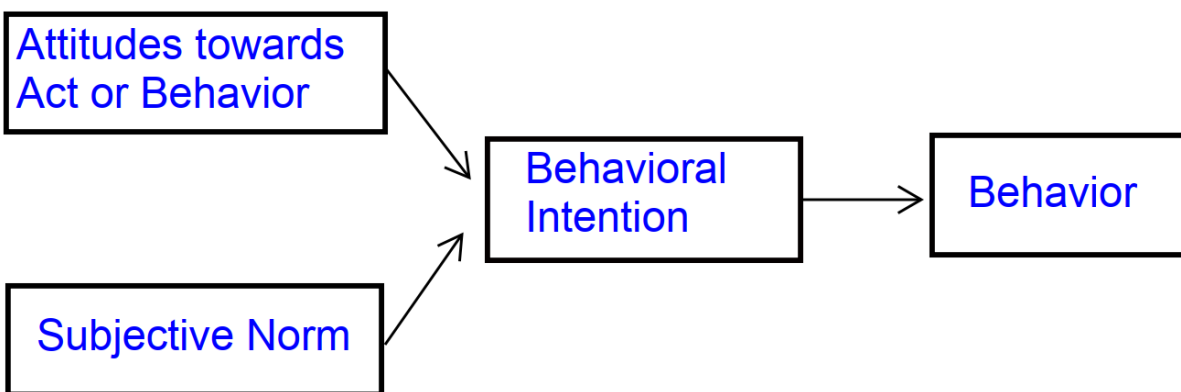
Note: This figure demonstrates the elements of the theory which affect behavioral intention and subsequently behavior (Fischbein & Ajzen, 1975).

Digital Salespeople: Expectancy Theory

The fourth theory explored in this paper is expectancy theory. The theory is one of the more influential theories related to workforce motivation (Miner, 2015). In research on work and motivation, Vroom (1964) theorized workers act rationally and choose actions that maximize their utility and minimize their discomfort. Vroom expressed a simple equation which demonstrates that motivation is a function of valence, expectancy, and instrumentality. Vroom defined as the value associated to potential rewards by the completion of the behavior. Expectancy refers to their belief that the effort in question will help them achieve their goals. Finally, instrumentality represents in their belief in the reward or outcome materializing for their effort. The theory can be expressed as a mathematical equation as follows:

Figure 4

Expectancy Theory of Motivation

Note: This figure demonstrates the theory and the formula it argues affects motivation (Vroom, 1964).

Brown and Peterson (1994) demonstrated a link between the expectancy theory and the effort applied to work and direct selling. In a study utilizing the expectancy theory and salesforce automation, Moutot and Bascoul (2008) were able to demonstrate a correlation between salespeople's negative perceptions about utility and comfort to their adoption and utilization. In their research on sales technology orientation Hunter and Perraul (2006) argue that based on the expectancy theory, salespeople who have learned to be effective without digital selling technology they will see less value or need in company provided sales technology. In order for digital salespeople to choose to adopt digital selling technology, they need to see the value of such tools to try to accept them.

Evaluating motivation to adopt digital selling technology through the expectancy model can reveal how to approach launching technology in a sales organization (Nasri & Charfeddine, 2012). For valence, the reward associated with the intended action needs to be valued appropriately such as bonuses, promotions, etc. For instrumentality, it comes down to trust in leaders and the organizations policies. Finally, expectancy the salesperson needs to feel the goals are both achievable and attainable.

Policy Recommendations

Research on the current state of the digitization of sales indicates that organizations are far from where they would expect to be. Lacking direct guidance on digitization the sales

processes, many companies simply engage in a process of trial and error (Guenzi & Habel, 2020). Despite low barriers to entry, it is estimated that two thirds of sales teams do not have a social media strategy (Guenzi & Habel, 2020). Finally, the concept of digitization may garner positive attention by business leaders and is often recognized as a buzzword that lacks a clear definition (Trittin-Ulbrich et al., 2021). The guidance in this section is directed to business and sales leaders in order to shape their approach to investing in, introducing, implementing, and managing of digital selling technology.

Research focuses more heavily on the benefits and journey of digitization by organizations, but the perspectives of the salespeople is lacking in literature. In order to transform to a digital organization, old norms and behaviors will have to be forgotten in order to truly transform (Moncrief, 2017). It's understood through sales digitization research that salespeople not only need to adopt the digital selling technology, but also change routines and procedures as well as participate in new activities (Guenzi & Nijssen, 2021). It's been noted in research that digital transformation projects may increase a salespersons workload (Guenzi & Habel, 2020).

The digital transformation accelerated by the global pandemic is resulting in increased challenges for employers to engage and retain their selling teams. In research conducted by Xactly (2021) of over 2000 sales managers, 58% of the participating companies saw recent salespeople turnover. In another research study conducted by Prater (2021) it's estimated that 44% of salespeople are planning to leave their jobs in the next two years.

Those sales employees who are staying in their roles are not achieving the productivity expectations of their organizations. In evaluating the performance of salespeople, CSO Insight (2019) conducted research in sales quota achievement and found only 53% of salespeople are

reaching their quota. In research on salespersons performance, Efti (2020) concluded a key factor in salespeople's performance relates to organization support and systems. The reviewed factors affecting the current performance of salespeople has been determined to be an opportunity for organizations to provide the resources necessary for salespeople to be more productive (Lauzi et al., 2023). The immediate disruption of digital technology has opportunities to increase productivity (Wengler et al., 2021).

Customers today possess access to more channels and information than ever before and because of this they have a level of knowledge and power selling organizations need to adapt to. In their research on digital selling, Fergurson et al. (2021) recommends organizations adapt to this generation of customer who is more knowledgeable. The adaption to the customers orientation will be essential for the salesperson to customer relationship (Fergurson et al., 2021).

In addition to increased knowledge, customers today have different expectations of their salespeople. One emerging trend in client to business engagement is that clients prefer fewer in person interactions (Rangarajan et al., 2021). Clients are also more accepting and in many cases expecting of proactive behavior by the businesses they purchase from (Alamaki & Korpela, 2021). Sales researchers such as Thaichon et al. (2018) argue that sales teams should align both online and offline selling operations to increase value because customers recognize when both channels are not aligned.

Today's clients expect more of their business-to-business salespeople in not only the value they provide, but the sense of personalized communication and understanding. A study by LinkedIn (2018) determined that clients expect personalized selling identifying that 96% of customer expect that salespeople needs to demonstrate understandings of the client's business needs. Additionally, 93% of the customers expect personalized communication. Finally, 93% of

clients expect relevant content to be provided by the salespeople. In the business-to-business environment, buyers expect value in not only the products they receive but, in the relationships, they develop with their suppliers (Cuevas, 2018).

Recognizing the changing customer expectations will require levels of adaption by selling organizations. In their research on digital selling transformations (Mattila et al., 2021) suggest organizations recognize their digital transition will require reevaluating sales force structures, strategies, and capabilities. Mattila adds that this transition needs to be lead and embraced by sales leadership and seen as part of an entire digital ecosystem. Furthermore, organizations adapt their business models, strategies, and practices (Fernandez-Vidal et al., 2022). Another adaption is the increasing desire by customers to have well designed digital tools created by businesses to help them self-research and educate (Fischer at al., 2022).

Not only do new norms need to be learned, but old norms also require unlearning. In fact, the fundamental steps in matching solutions to needs in sales needs to be unlearned to help migrate to more advanced selling techniques (Lacoste, 2018). In research on digital selling transformation (Mattila et al., 2021) conclude that the transformation may be so significant that simply teaching new is not adequate and fundamentally addressing and reframing what is known. Matilla et al (2021) advise four major phases to unlearning old sales norms to learn new digital ones which include identifying a need to unlearn, determining what needs to be unlearned, discarding old sales processes, and instilling cultural change in the entire sales program.

In their research on sales, Guenzi and Nijssen (2020) identify the key for salespeople to adopt digital technology is their individual ability. Future salesperson profiling will need to adapt to the characteristics necessary for digital adoption (Mattila et al., 2021). Literature reinforces the need for salespeople who play critical roles in complex selling situations (Alavi & Habel, 2021).

Organizations will be required to develop digital capabilities in their systems and processes (Wengler et al., 2021). Finally, future recruiting and training procedures will need to be adapted suggesting that positive outcome framing helps facilitate employee readiness to adopt change (Seo et al., 2004).

From their research, it's recommended that the following framework be considered by organizations (Guenzi & Habel, 2020). First conducting an analysis of sales process with an emphasis on eliminating complexity. Second determine the processes that are vital but have opportunities for performance enhancement. Third, organizations can develop a path to migrate specific transition for these process to a digital strategy. Finally, sales leaders and salespeople should share in identifying the transition of these processes to digital ones.

In order to be successful in migrating to a digital selling organizations, the body of research provides key guidance. For technology to improve performance, salespeople must believe in the technology and properly embrace it (Rodriguez et al., 2012). Organizations need to think beyond simple technology adoption and develop digitalization enablement mentalities and accordingly modify business models and strategies (Mattila et al., 2021). In order to fully embrace new processes as selling organizations, selling teams must be willing to discontinue old information and behaviors (Lacoste, 2018). Another paradigm shift that may be necessary is the belief that the sales technologies being introduced by organizations are not created with the starting point of the clients' behaviors or preferences (Giovannetti et al., 2022)

The "why" messaging to salespeople to adopt digital selling technology needs to meet them where they are in helping them understand how the technology will help them achieve their goals more efficiently. In their research on digital transformation of sales Guenzi and Habel (2020) concluded that there are four benefits of this transformation. The first is increased

knowledge available to the salespeople, in particular regarding the client they are servicing. Second, it creates new opportunities to connect with clients by such means as social media. Third, it provides improved opportunities to demonstrate value to clients. Fourth, it helps accelerate the selling cycle through faster decision making on the part of the client.

Ethical Implications

The world of business and sales has no single professional body that guides its practices or norms. This paper has addressed the types of different digital selling technologies and analyzed the digital transformation, the perspective of customers, and the perspective of salespeople. If salespeople cannot adapt to the needs of their customers by adopting digital technology, they and their organizations will fail to attract customers. The primary ethical consideration of digital transformation is the role of business managers in how they shape the transformation with their salespeople.

A real ethical consideration in digital transformation is digital ageism. Technology creates a divide which excludes older individuals (Ball et al., 2019). In research on ageism related to artificial intelligence, Chu et al. (2022) concluded most research on the digital transformation doesn't adequately explore the effects to and the approach to older individuals and suggests future research prioritize this inevitable challenge.

As previously advised in the policy recommendation, the digital transformation requires positive framing. Alternatively, sales managers may punish employees for not complying with intended change (Furst & Cable, 2008), such actions typically have adverse effects on the way salespeople view the intentions of change (Venkatesh et al., 1995). When coercion is the

mechanism utilized by sales leaders the positive framing originally intended becomes diminished eliminating the possibility for employees to independently conclude positive framing (Mullins & Agnihotri, 2022).

Recruiting individuals who have the aptitude to embrace digital technology and embrace a changing landscape is an important part of the digital transformation. Recruiting should have the intention of acquiring individuals with the necessary skills to perform work and to bring in individuals who can challenge conventional norms to accelerate adoption (Akgün et al., 2006). In their research on digital selling adoption in sales, Guenzi and Nijssen (2021) believe employers may prefer to hire individuals who already have digital selling experience because it may be seen as easier to acquire an individual who has already learned and embraces the technology, rather than attempt to train and shape behaviors. If recruiting tends to favor individuals who already have digital selling experience, the potential negative consequence is missing out on individuals who possess the willingness and aptitude, but not yet the experience.

In a study exploring the theory of reasoned action understanding that employee behaviors were being influences by leadership, Kurland (1995) determined that ethical intentions were not negatively affected by the salesperson by their perceived control. By their nature salespeople rely on their instincts and learned experiences and may be reluctant to adopt technology for (Rapp and Beeler, 2021). Salespeople are concerned with the new divisions of labor between salespeople and clients in the form of self service (Mahlamäki et al., 2020).

As sales processes continue evolving in fundamental ways, legacy processes are at risk of imminent obsolescence (Mattila et al., 2021). A further concern from salespeople and selling organizations is that contemporary digital selling applications may decrease a purchasing parties' dependence on the assistance of a salesperson for procurement (Bongers et al., 2021). In research

on the human side of the digital transformation Alavi and Habel (2021) concluded 27% of salespeople feel their jobs are threatened due technology, 25% feel they may be replaced, 23% feel they will substitute by colleagues with better technology skills. In additional to their roles being in jeopardy by technology, Bongers also found that 61% of salespeople feel they can be supervised negatively by technology and 33% of salespeople feel mental exhaustion due to technology.

Summary

In summary, business-to-business sales organizations face significant challenges adapting to the needs of their clients while also helping their salespeople become digital, these challenges were exaggerated by the Covid pandemic. Sales organizations are struggling in selecting the correct digital selling tools, recruiting the necessary skilled employees, and onboarding/training those they employ (Wiseman et al., 2022). The digital transformation is more complex than simply accepting a new tool to perform a function, but fully transforming the strategy and processes of sales (Guenzi & Habel, 2020).

As organizations continue to make investments in digital selling technology, the decision for which technology they investment in needs to be measured more heavily towards how they implement it within their organizations. Substantial investments are being made by firms of all sizes in all industries to migrate towards digital selling organizations (Freimark et al., 2018). In research on sales enablement, Sing et al. (2019) concluded that much research has been conducted on sales force technology but little research on implementation. Recent adoption of

sales force technologies has had poor success rates, with failure rates estimated at 55-80% (Williams et al., 2017).

In their research on digital readiness Mullins and Agnihotri (2022) identified five key technologies categories for sales technology. The first is salesforce automation, which can be defined as the use of software to replace human worker business processes and tasks (Lhuer, 2016). The second is customer relationship management, which can be defined as software system(s) which includes four facets including customer information, organizational data, customer relationship technology, and knowledge management (Sin et al., 2005). The third is Information technology, which can be defined as the expertise of managing information. (Whitson, 2020). The fourth is social media, which can be defined as the utilization of software to support interactions among people with the goals of creating community as well as creating and distributing content (Von Krogh, 2012). The fifth is artificial Intelligence, which can be defined as the utilization of using computers with software and algorithms can perform tasks previously performed by humans. (Kumar et al., 2019).

Of the outlined digital selling technologies, a recent sample was conducted to evaluate specific digital selling technology adoption by Alavi and Habel (2021). They sampled 128 sales leaders in different industries. Their conclusion was that 89% had adopted customer relationship management, 21% artificial intelligence in the form of sales/service bots, 73% social media, 39% big data (information technology).

In the same research conducted by Alavi and Habel (2021) the attitudes of salespersons were captured related to digital selling technology. 27% of respondents felt their existing job/role was being threatened by technology. 25% felt that they may someday be replaced by digital selling technology. 21% felt that their personal value was diminished with digital selling

technology. Finally, 61% responded a fear of advanced monitoring and 33% responded increased stress related to the technology. In research on social media and customer relationship technology, Itani et al. (2017, 2020) suggest generational factors may play a role in technology adoption by salespeople.

The selling process has already been dramatically altered by digital selling technologies (Guenzi & Habel, 2020). In research on digital selling, Alvavi and Habel (2021) recognize that the increased productivity by digital selling, it is essential to raise attention to the human side of the salesperson adoption and pitfalls of digital selling technology. Sales organizations need to recognize that sales has changed, customers have changed, and their salespeople need to adapt.

There is increasing literature on the topic of digitization of the selling process and the focus of research is not to ask if sales should be digitized, but rather focusing on identifying the value of making the shift and the best practices for organizations to do so. Although some organizations have adopted digital technologies, others lag and technology such as social media platforms affect the relationships business-to-business organizations have (Hofacker et al., 2020).

The research is clear on the desire of sales organizations and customers on becoming digital, the only delayed factor is salespeople becoming digital. Four theories are introduced which provide seminal understands of their aversion to digital selling technology.
The first of the theories explored in this paper is The first theory is The Unified Theory of Acceptance and use of Technology which was developed in by Venkatesh et al. (2003) by blending a variety of behavioral studies theories in order to provide a comprehensive understanding of individuals acceptance of technology. The second is the Job-demand resource theory which was originally introduced by Demerouti et al. (2001) as a theory to understand employee burnout in the workplace. The third is the theory of reasoned action which was

introduced by Fishbein and Ajzen (1975) demonstrated that belief, attitude, subjective norms, and intention affect behavior. The fourth is expectancy theory which was introduced by Vroom (1964) to understands the factors which relate to workforce motivation.

Finally, research is clear to digitize sales, the burden falls on sales organizations to both find and create digital salespeople. In their research on digital selling transformations (Mattila et al., 2021) simply teaching new norms is not enough to achieve digitization goals, but fundamentally reframing education and proactively unlearning new norms will be required. Salespeople need to believe in the technology to accept the technology, there are many systematic steps advised in the literature but one of the most common-sense steps is to share the responsibility by salespeople and their sales managers (Guenzi & Habel, 2020).

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